

# A Sermon in Stone

Poems from the Cathedrals of France

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To Jeannette

One of the gentlest and humblest souls I have ever met.

## Introduction

In March 1996, my sister and I traveled to France. We stayed in Paris, and from there explored many of the centuries-old cathedrals and basilicas that grace the French countryside. From the great eastern rose in Laon to the shadowed blues of Chartres, from the simplicity of Germigny-des-Près to the intricacy of Beauvais, theology came alive. Spirituality became incarnate in stone and glass.

These poems flow from those days, to capture the wonder, the insight, and the challenge I received as I walked the vaulted ambulatories. Read the stories that glowed in ancient stained glass. Knelt in silence before altars that been the place of worship for untold thousands.

Without audible voice, the cathedrals speak. They proclaim the glory of God and the mystery of his sacrifice. They reveal the fallen nature of man and the manifold grace of his redemption. They chronicle the history of the world, from the dawn of creation to the blast of the last trumpet.

They are forever ...

A Sermon in Stone.

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## St-Denis

when God said  
Let There Be Light!  
it was not a shaft of white  
that split  
the murky blackness  
but a gloriana rainbow  
spilling out  
cascading down  
splashing the blackness  
transforming void and  
formlessness to  
butterfly wings  
rainforest orchids  
peacock feathers  
and he sang for joy  
with his creation  
in that first flush  
of brilliant  
tangible  
prismatic  
Light.

## St-Denis Roses

Let it encompass

everything

but let it begin  
with the Father  
standing Alpha and Omega  
ever the beginning  
ever the end  
in himself it had its beginning  
with us it shall never end

and it shall encompass

everything

let the Son spin out  
in laughing ecstasy  
from the bosom of the Father  
from the eternal embrace  
from the closest gracious steps  
divine music could lend to song  
let him inscribe a perfect circle  
at each point pause  
let his feet spread life  
his hands mold form  
his breath breathe spirit  
six times let him pause  
and on the seventh with laughter  
to rest

for it shall encompass

everything

and the Spirit still moves  
over void no longer  
but over times and seasons  
hung in the heavens  
as a reminder to men  
of he who bears Living Water  
of God-become-Man  
of the Virgin Bride  
of the end of times  
as of the beginning  
twelve signs to mark the times  
the magnificent movement  
of celestial arts

and so it shall encompass

everything

every labor of man  
every swing of the scythe  
every clip of the pruning shear  
every shepherd's crook  
every chisel on the wood  
every strike on the anvil  
from the small to the great  
peasant priest and king  
every man  
every woman  
every child and babe  
none shall be forfeit  
from the joy of perfect harmony  
from the rhythm that moves the stars  
from the intricacy of every step  
from the dance  
from the Great Dance  
for it shall encompass

everything

## Chartres

Still water runs deep.  
Sometimes  
as deep as an ocean.

Shafts of stone like  
massive columns  
surge downward to  
murky depths  
pierce upward with  
slender fingers questing  
for jeweled water  
spilling forth  
sapphire-azure  
touched with coral  
lancets of cathedral light  
arching downward to  
a cruciform altar.

## St-Etienne

There is one body  
one Lord  
one faith  
one hope  
one baptism.

What is time?  
Merely the separation of the living  
from the dead.  
What is space?  
Merely the span of the near  
from the far.  
Neither are boundaries;  
but only thresholds.  
We are surrounded by a great cloud  
of witnesses;  
we are branches of the self-same  
Vine,  
and so shall all rejoice  
together.

## Rheims

The bread  
    and the wine  
and the Lamb that was slain.

Three medallions  
light-filled jewels  
to grace the breast  
of a three-Personed God.

Amber fields  
swaying heads of  
sun-ripened grain  
six days to labor  
to scythe the wheat  
thresh the good  
grind the flour  
knead the dough  
bake the bread  
and on the seventh day  
to rest.

Circle each one  
with tower and tabernacle  
mercy seat and cherubim  
deep wells and open graves.

Summer months  
to tend the vines  
watch curling tendrils  
grow heavy with clusters  
to press  
to strain  
to cask  
to darkness  
to wait  
before opening wide  
and deeply drinking  
to celebrate.

Circle each one -

Alpha and Omega  
lily and fire  
oil and incense

Forget not the Lamb  
set center in sacrifice  
sword slain  
unbroken  
blood flows like fire  
crimson to wash white  
fire to consume the dross.

Three medallions  
light-filled jewels  
set before the throne  
of purple-clad Majesty.

The bread  
    and the wine  
and the Lamb that was slain.

## Beauvais

There she sits.  
Her coat is black  
as is her kerchief  
or maybe it is just  
the silhouetting  
of the light  
behind.

Her form is lumpy  
shaped as the porridge made  
for countless centuries;  
shaped by her thousand children  
and their thousand, thousand children  
shaped by the fields  
the hearth  
the doghard labor.

She knows the times  
the seasons  
no prophecy  
only reality.

Her grizzled head bowed  
her gnarled hands  
thickened knuckles  
quiescent  
in her lap  
perhaps from weariness  
much more from waiting  
age-old waiting  
age-old devotion  
whispered repetition  
*Christe, eleison -*

Unaware of the light  
streaming in a rainbow  
pooling in a crown  
at her feet.

## Dead Folk

Whoever said that  
dead people were quiet  
hasn't walked  
in these portals.

They don't have the decency  
to look out.  
Above you.  
Around you.  
To be holier-than-thou folk  
heavenly-minded  
no earthly good.  
They look down at you.  
Down into you.  
And you can just tell  
what they're thinking.

David with his adultery  
sets his feet dancing  
a new fast-paced rhythm  
to go with the psalm  
about the Redeemer's grace.

Aaron quits his grumbling  
takes that lamb  
drives the knife home  
and lifts that spilled blood  
by faith alone.

Saint Denis, who maybe lost his head  
once too often  
in mortal life  
holds it now  
in perfect peace.

And good old George  
has slain his dragon  
and dares me  
slay my own.

I'd rather not.

Hell of a lot easier  
to go with the flow -  
that downhill slide has  
always been  
the most fun.  
It's going uphill  
that's the killer.

I'll stay among my living folk.  
I find they're a lot quieter  
than the dead.

## An Architecture Lesson

There are over two thousand pieces of sculpture  
that grace the exterior of Chartres.

*For we are surrounded  
by a great cloud of witnesses  
myriads upon myriads  
and thousands upon thousands.*

Note here on the western facade  
how narrow they are: like columns themselves.

*Indeed, they were narrow.  
They walked a narrow path  
entered through a narrow door  
like the doors they still guard.*

Above, we see the gallery of kings. It is well-integrated,  
holding an important, but not overstated, space.

*Kings of Judah. Kings of France.  
Kings who knew that Crown and Cathedral  
could be integrated.  
And should be.*

And here, as we approach the southern portal  
notice how each column and pillar is thematically developed.

*The Dark Ages were surely unenlightened.  
See who they placed immortal in stone:  
martyrs, women, and the liberal arts.  
We hold our prejudice in high esteem.*

Let us enter the crypt. Like a womb, or a grave,  
it was the beginning place of a pilgrim's journey.

*How many books have now been written?  
We strive to recapture "the child within,"  
and to triumph just once over our darker nature.  
But we smile at what Nicodemus heard.*

As we come to the nave, note the vaulting,  
particularly at the transept-crossing above the altar.  
*Romans, Jews, Greeks, Africans*  
*all passed the foot of the cross and mocked.*  
*We stand in the center*  
*and take pictures.*

Lastly, let me point out the quality of light  
as it comes through the stained glass.  
*In the blessing given to Noah,*  
*the rainbow held a promise.*  
*In Bethlehem, the same Light cast*  
*an incarnate Son.*

## Faces

*"Art is the signature of man."  
- G.K. Chesterton*

Who he was, I shall never know.  
But his face has strength  
earnestness  
the quick understanding  
of a sea-captain  
his beard shows some care  
and some neglect  
a man who loves life  
but will give it all  
if called for.

Across from him, high cheekbones mark  
a gaunter visage  
lines deep cut  
sallow-mouthed and introspecting  
maybe a bard  
maybe a merchant  
both paths would yield his  
troubled eye.

Gnome-like beside, a tiny figure cringes  
hands to ears  
what sound he hears  
I know not.  
I hear not.  
But he heard  
and mayhap it drew him  
to his grave.

Who are you, soldier?  
Why graces your face  
the front of the sanctuary?  
No name  
only your countenance  
to speak for all eternity  
your fearless gaze  
and courageous pride.  
And smaller, nooked in corners

why cowled?  
why hidden?  
Who are you, lady?  
and wherefore pained  
what tragedy struck  
your noble heart?  
what placed you here  
in the solace of the doorway  
to offer forever  
your woe to the Cross?

They left their legacy  
yet inscribed not a single word  
  
only their faces.

## Etienne Weathering

*Once, and only once, I saw a carving on the outside of a church. Not as a part of the statuary, or of the small scenes often carved near the tympanum or on the doorposts. It was simply on the great expanse of otherwise unadorned wall: a niche carved hardly an inch deep originally; a simple presentation of the crucifixion. And I knew that I was standing on holy ground.*

It was carved with care  
and weathered by time.  
Once a crucifixion  
now only the Cross.

The faces are gone  
the bodies remain only  
roughened shapes  
vague shadows  
recollections of Golgotha.

What were you?  
An altar? A shrine?  
Bas-relief carved because  
a mason's chisel slipped  
cleft the stone  
in the suggestion  
of a Cross?

No liturgy here  
no candles  
no incense  
the paten and chalice remain  
within.  
Here the soil is the Body  
the Blood is the dew  
and the season's zephyrs  
bring the Spirit  
of an ever-new Pentecost.

## **Agnus Dei**

*Who do you say that I am?  
- Jesus, first century A.D.*

If he was a teacher,  
I am glad  
for my mind needs a teacher  
and knowledge is a precious thing.

If he was a prophet,  
I am glad  
for my ear needs a prophet  
to speak the words of the Father.

If he was a healer  
I am glad  
for my sickness needs a healer  
and my body is already dying.

If he was a man  
I am glad  
for my race needs a man  
and not a myth as our hero.

If he was God  
I am glad  
for my kind needs a God  
to be bigger than ourselves.

If he was a lamb  
I am saved  
for my sin needs  
a lamb.

The quartet of poems following is taken from the four stages of the *lectio divina*, the divine reading. The *lectio divina* is one of the many paths that we can take in order to deepen our relationship with God; to my eyes, I saw it embodied in the cathedrals of France. Its first stage is *lectio*, reading, wherein we actively take in the Word of God. The second stage is *meditatio*, reflecting, or the time we spend taking and digesting that holy food. The third stage is *oratio*, responding, the dialogue we participate in with the Most High; and the fourth stage is *contemplatio*, resting, where words are no longer necessary, and we follow the psalmist's admonition to, "be still and know that he is God."

## Lectio

The Word became flesh  
and dwelt among us  
the mountains inscribed his name  
the seas swelled deep  
with the harmonies of his songs  
meadowlarks trilled his dawning  
and mankind walked in his likeness.

He is the image of the invisible God  
the exact representation of his glory  
the shekinah glory of the tabernacle  
the pillar of fire  
the smoking column  
the mountain whose holiness had been death  
offered death himself  
that we might climb to New Jerusalem.

No man has seen God at any time  
the Only-begotten God - he has explained him  
he at the first carved our names  
in the palms of his hands  
to one day carve his Spirit  
on the tablet of our hearts  
every word that we speak echoes again  
the one Word spoken and loved  
the Word become flesh  
the God who is with us.

## Meditatio

*In the beginning was the Word –*  
I entered,  
and the nave exploded before me.  
one tremendous arch  
the narrow gate suddenly become  
the colossal entryway  
to the City of God.

*In the beginning was the Word –*  
like a mirror fractured  
ambulatory rose to gallery  
gallery to triforium  
triforium to clerestory  
a hundred arches  
kaleidoscoped like prisms  
dancing each upon the others.

*In the beginning was the Word –*  
fountain-like jewels  
inscribed the windows  
marquis-points arching heavenward  
a thousand, thousand facets  
each a miniature arch  
a miniature nave  
a trillion repetitions of that single  
Word.

## Oratio

I felt the bass chords.  
Like the deepest swell  
of some mighty ocean.  
The columns became pipes  
for an organ made of stone  
bellows rushing not air  
but light.

The melody rose  
high like the stringcourse  
resonant with a hundred arches  
sprinkling in brilliant tremolos  
through crystal-cut windows.

As if some hand played  
a dozen keyboards  
feet dancing on the pedals  
the sum of all the psalms  
poured out in a dizzying symphony  
exaltation magnified  
in the shout of living stone.

## Contemplatio

From the music  
enter the rest.

Like a formata hold  
the silence lengthens  
not in apathy  
but in expectancy.

Count the beats  
like the pulse of the heart  
a rhythm in time  
to the Conductor's baton.

It is the moment to breathe deeply  
the philharmonia still ringing  
through the blood.

It is the moment to hold from breathing  
attuned to every soundless movement  
waiting for the first note and chord  
to break forth anew.

## A Tautology

By faith  
we do not begin with premises  
but with truths.

By faith  
we know that our foundation  
is God alone.

By faith  
we set in place the chief cornerstone  
that is Jesus Christ.

By faith  
we open treble doors as one entrance  
to the Triune God.

By faith  
we carve the saints as living examples  
of holiness.

By faith  
we raise the towers  
to the heights of heaven

By faith  
we arch the nave  
like the courts of God.

By faith  
we place the transept  
to form the Cross.

By faith  
we set the altar  
in the center of God's heart.

By faith  
we spin the roses  
like wheels of the eternal.

By faith  
we cast the windows  
as divine light incarnate.

By faith  
we lift the Passion  
in glass and stone and wood.

By faith  
we trace the labyrinth  
with its meanderings leading to God.

By faith  
we set our eyes eastward  
to the rising of the sun.

By faith  
we affirm that we are living stones  
being built up as a temple of God.

## A Heretic's Defense

First point:

in which the central tympanum depicts the separation of the damned from the saved.

It is the objection of the plaintiff that this is a statement of spiritual and moral bigotry.

Second point:

in which the sculpture of Christ (the historical figure commonly so called) bears the marks of the crucifixion and the crown of the resurrection.

It is the objection of the plaintiff that if he is man, let him stay dead, and if he is God, let him stay out of it.

Third point:

in which the concept of the Trinity is repeated in treble arches, treble windows, and hewn sculptures of the same.

It is the objection of the plaintiff that what cannot be comprehended must not be presented.

Fourth point:

in which the symbols of the Eucharist are set forth in wood and stone and glass and maintain the central place at the altar.

It is the objection of the plaintiff that these reminders of humanity's so-called sin have a negative impact on the esteem and well-ness of the individuals thus referenced.

Your Honor, the prosecution rests.

## Windows

In the beginning  
windows were stories.  
“Comic books for the illiterate”  
some might say.  
I’ll let them talk.  
I have to use my guide book  
to understand what my forebears  
would have read easily.  
I have come to see the Dark Ages  
were enlightened  
with light.

In the middle  
windows were portraits.  
History and adventure  
debilitated  
into chronology and dynasty.  
One king looks very much  
like another.  
One queen might be the cousin  
of her neighbor.  
But they were there  
struggling to preserve  
the age-old continuity.

In the end  
windows were glass.  
Our generation experiments  
with color  
but has forgotten shading.  
We experiment with shape  
but have forgotten form.  
We reach for beauty  
but have forgotten purpose.  
We would place  
an impressionist rose  
in the eastern apse  
and never give thought  
to the Rose of Sharon.

## Let There Be

Let there be reverence.  
Let it be seen in lancing windows  
towering columns  
height and depth  
shadowed mystery  
and brilliant clarity.

Let there be history.  
God has carved each of us  
on the palms of his hands.  
Let us carve each other  
so that we also  
remember.

Let there be tradition.  
Words gain weight  
with time.  
Ritual is the stream  
that molds the canyon  
shaping, and smoothing.

Let there be creeds.  
Take away my individuality  
lest I sink into heresy.  
Let me be one with those  
who have gone before  
for they have known thee.

Let there be symbol.  
Let the bread be your body  
the wine be your blood  
breathe anew the paschal covenant  
let me hear the bleat of the lamb  
and cast my knees before the altar.

## Adam: The Abbaye aux Hommes, Caen

In primeval strength  
I thrust my towers heavenward  
naked and unornamented  
as new-made Man.

To walk my nave  
is to know the sweep of the Milky Way  
the splendor of supernovas  
becomes the royal diadem of Adam.

Hidden windows are nebulas  
surging with color  
spiraling in creative gravity  
a cosmos flooded with Light.

When the first Adam fell  
the universe gave tormented cry  
plummeting with faint and hopeless tears  
into the black hole of hell.

When the second Adam rose  
he reversed that insatiable greed  
flinging the galaxies wide  
and planting our feet anew among the stars.

## Eve: The Abbaye aux Dames, Caen

Time was new  
and meant for marking joys.  
I walked in the Garden  
where leaves stroked my skin  
in trusting, sensual pleasure.  
Flowers yielded fragrance  
every one meant to be caressed  
each petal its own glory.  
The delicacy of being  
was delight.

Then, of a sudden,  
time became old.  
The body needed protection  
and when garments were invaded  
a shell grew about the spirit.  
Innocence had been locked  
in the Garden  
guarded by an angel  
with a flaming sword.

For three days, could they be marked,  
time stopped.  
Once the divine hand had clothed me  
in animal skins  
to hide my shame.  
A second time his hand reached out  
clothing me anew  
in the holiness of his rising.  
Damask swirled like snowflakes  
and laughter fell  
like a girl's first realization  
that she is a woman.

## Germigny-des-Pres

*"Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool –  
where then is the house you could build for me?"*

If I have but one talent  
I will not bury it.  
If I have but one stone  
I will make of it an altar  
to my God.

If I have but two lines  
I will shape them into a cross.  
If I have but two steps  
I will raise them as a dais  
for the paten and chalice.

If I have but three windows  
I will center them in the apse.  
If I have but three alcoves  
I will place them as chapels  
for the hungry of heart.

If I have but four columns  
I will set them round the altar.  
If I have but four sides  
I will raise them as a lantern  
above his body and blood.

If I have all these  
I shall ask but one thing more:  
Let me have countless arches  
like the endless ripples  
of eternity.

## St-Benoit-sur-Loire

Are you blind?  
I carved the beasts  
that inhabit my world  
set the psyche in stone  
intertwining history and perception  
for so it always is.

I set hope beside fear  
the Anointed next to the Judas.  
You fear not  
therefore you hope not.

Are you deaf?  
The melodies still raised  
by bare-foot men and cowled  
beckon inward  
if the forested porch  
is the world without  
the lifted nave and arching apse  
bring close the world to come.

I claim in humility  
the place of God on earth.  
You claim in pride  
the place of man in heaven.

Are you mute?  
To those who have come to me  
I have given security  
peace  
and they have repaid me  
by tongues of thanksgiving.

To the man who knows his worth  
all life is a gift.  
To the man who believes himself worthy  
all life is his demand.

## A Short Note from Rudolf Bultmann

Demythologize  
humanize  
eulogize  
ostracize  
but don't, please don't,  
call him God.

Historical  
rhetorical  
endurable  
deplorable  
but don't, please don't,  
call him God.

Teacher  
preacher  
seeker  
dissenter  
but don't, please don't,  
call him God.

## A Short Response to the Note from Rudolf Bultmann

To what will you liken me?  
I am the ram portrayed  
beneath the feet of Abraham  
in my hoof I hold  
the vine's heavy cluster.

To what will you liken me?  
I am the pelican carved  
on a capital in St-Remi  
piercing her breast  
to feed her young.

To what will you liken me?  
I am the Gemini twins  
smiling from the zodiac  
one for my Godhead  
one for my manhood.

To what will you liken me?  
I am the lamb slain by Aaron  
innocence lifted to the knife  
and the crouching figure below  
holds a soon-filled chalice.

In all of life it is not the lonely fact  
but the symbol  
that is the thing.

## The Queen

Royalty is a bad word  
in this age of democracy.  
The dictates of an absolute ruler  
whether good or bad  
are bad  
because they are absolute.  
We revel in our choices  
but we never choose  
we only drift.

Royalty was an age  
of commitment  
of drama  
of ceremony.  
Like the commitment  
of God to man.  
Like the drama  
of Gethsemane and Golgotha.  
Like the ceremony  
of the bread and the wine.

We are too civilized  
too educated  
to kill royalty in official execution.  
But the queen shall die  
a lonely death  
surrounded by technology  
that claims to harness power  
hemmed in by the arts  
that profess themselves to liberate.  
And without her absolute rule  
we shall die.

## Thoroughfare

I wanted a place  
set apart.  
Spires rising  
from the lonely plain  
the greensward a vast  
expanse  
that led to the portals  
of immaculate stone.

I found iron railings  
delineating a semi-circle of  
fifty  
maybe a hundred feet  
around the great doors.  
Sometimes even the perimeter  
was blocked:  
hemmed in  
by secular buildings crowding close.

I wanted  
a holy mountain.  
Where pilgrim's feet could trod  
rock-hewn steps  
let sweat drip from his brow  
until the crest revealed  
the celestial crown  
and the earth below was shed  
in favor of heaven's heights.

I found a tram  
to carry me to the plateau  
and no gates barred the entry  
to all but heart-burdened pilgrims.  
Tourist shops and  
mass-produced mementos  
lined the streets.  
Car horns blared the air  
and the click of cameras  
was omnipresent.  
I wanted the God

high  
and lifted up.  
I wanted the world discarded  
in favor of the supernal.

I found a still,  
small chuckle  
as the God-man asked  
where else the glorious city  
should be made corporeal?  
Like he himself,  
spirit becomes incarnate  
only  
on the streets of Man.

## St-Benoit Crypt

In that hollow womb  
the darkness is soft  
enfolding arches  
so that they do not fade  
but are muted  
into shadow.

Shadow there  
holds hands with light  
a gentle harmony  
as flickering candles  
illuminate fears  
and dispel illusions.

Illusions come with  
entanglement.  
The strangle-grip of  
a thousand harried hours  
attention to detail choking  
the details we ought to attend.

Attend once more.  
The first place is not  
to seek the rapturous glory  
of the nave above  
but the humbling of the soul  
to receive it.

## Scholastic Architects

Premises build  
one upon the other  
interlocking like arches  
rising to the clerestory  
to spill forth  
the light of reason.

Logic drives  
in undeviating lines  
of nave and ambulatory  
taking no turning  
until the end is arrived  
at the altar of Christ.

Fallacy is exposed  
on typanum and rood screen  
error held up to judgement  
and the falsehoods of heretics  
crumble  
before the truth carved in stone.

## St-Remi

Walls are substantial things.  
Designed to keep out.  
Designed to protect.

That is why they are made of stone.  
Or wood.  
Or iron.

Doors and apertures are kept at minimum.  
Watched carefully.  
Bolted strongly.

The enemy is without.  
He is strong.  
We are not.

The wall of St-Remi is made of light.  
Only windows.  
And doors.

Light admits entry.  
It beckons.  
And laughs.

God has no need for barricades.  
Or bolts.  
Or strongholds.

And in him  
neither do we.