

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.