

Reflections On Washington National Cathedral

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Speaking in a church, one cannot go far wrong beginning with confession. And I must confess that I am not by nature a reflective man. I am happiest when finishing one project and preparing for the next. But I also must confess that I have enjoyed revisiting the Cathedral in the halls of memory in anticipation of preparing this talk.

Being chosen as Washington National Cathedral Artist-in-Residence in 1994 has been one of the signal episodes of my life, particularly my life as an artist. That experience to this day remains a diamond in the rough revealing new facets as I turn it over in my memory.

My most vivid recollection—written in an indelible surge of adrenaline—centers on the day that the studio caught fire. I can still smell the fumes and see the smoke pouring from the mason's shed that abutted the rear wall of my workspace—a twenty by twenty frame shed that stood twenty yards north of the Cathedral's North Tower. I can still feel the stark realization that all of the wood I had been carving for five months was about to become so much kindling in the tinder box of that dry old carver's shed, and I did not have the slightest idea where to find a fire extinguisher. But during the winter, that old shed had developed a leaky water pipe that kept a five-gallon pail always topped up. It proved to be just enough to douse the flames.

For sheer exhilaration nothing can match the day that Joe Alonso, the Master Mason, took me clambering up in the farthest reaches of his domain. He showed me the church from the vantage of its builders. We climbed to the top of the *Gloria in Excelsis* tower, stopping to marvel at the peal bells and carillon; we ducked into the unfinished overcrofts of the north transept and apse, groped through pitch black passageways, and strode out onto sunlit catwalks inside at the clerestory level and outside at the base of the roof line. Joe showed me the easternmost sheets of lead roofing above the apse inscribed with the names of scores if not hundreds of Cathedral workers, and he said, "Now it's your turn," and gave me leave to add my signature to that privileged unofficial roll of Cathedral craftsmen.

My continuing education as a craftsman took place at the top of the steel scaffolding in the nave side aisles where Vincent Palumbo is carving the keystones of the vault ribs. There, I watched first-hand a master plying his trade. I watched him make faithful stone copies of other sculptors' clay designs, and I watched him create original sculpture freehand directly from his imagination into the limestone. There and in our studios we talked shop; we joked and gossiped. We became friends the way that craftsmen have since the invention of work, by sharing our experiences. He told me the story of the beginning of his apprenticeship as a nine-year-old boy in his father's workshop in Italy. His father came home one day and said, "I need someone to play the violin in my shop." "I'll play the violin for you, Papa," says Vince, not knowing that he had volunteered to

the arduous task of operating a primitive hand-powered bow drill. His father, Paolo, began working on the Cathedral in 1954, Vince, nine years later.

I spent some of my most pleasant and rewarding hours speaking with Canon Clerk of the Works Richard T. Feller. In the easiest interview I have ever conducted, I simply asked, "How did you become Clerk of the Works-- a well recognized profession in the twelfth century-- in our day and age?" And he replied, "Well, if you really want to know, I'll tell you." And in his clipped, courtly, West Virginia tones, in two sessions that lasted three hours apiece, he offered a captivating personal history of the building from 1953 onward. Without expressly stating it, Joe, Vince, and Canon Feller made plain the quiet, unassuming depth of spiritual commitment that underlies the concrete foundations of this place.

I shall never forget the hour that Colleen Meehan, the Cathedral Business Manager, asked me to join her and Canon Feller in her office. After she had generously praised my efforts, Canon Feller outlined four areas where he said the Cathedral might need some woodcarving and wondered if I were interested in working on any of them. I still have not the words to describe what I felt at having been asked to join in this enterprise. We have the first fruits of that meeting before us in the form of an exquisitely carved Gothic lectern, vintage 1920, from the hand of master craftsman Angelo Lualdi. The original four angels that he had carved for the lectern long ago disappeared before they had ever been photographed. Canon Feller gave me free rein to design replacements. I carved musician angels in the hope of expressing harmony in spiritual order.

But more than any one-day, any memorable meeting, or any artistic project, I was most affected by the cumulative experience of walking into the presence of this building day in and day out for eight months. You never get used to the Cathedral. You can never take it for granted. It never fades into the background. Every day, it conquers the mind and exalts the spirit. Every hour of every day, it changes. It continually surprises with revelations about itself. I have seen it glossed in ice, dusted in snow, glistening under cool spring rains, shrouded in shoals of mist, a whispered silhouette wakening to the dawn, sparkling dazzling crystalline noon bright, glowing gold in the last light of evening, gleaming deep violet under the full moon. I have listened to its ocean deep silences, heard its most mournful lamentations, and joined in its most joyous psalms. I have met every manner of humanity here from the Archbishop Emeritus of Canterbury to homeless pauper.

I cannot help but think of the Cathedral as a living thing. After all, its Indiana limestone came into being as a coral reef in the warm shallow waters of an ancient sea, and schools of fish all the colors of the rainbow swirled and flashed through its intricately living passageways. Now, eons later, dreamers like Bishop Henry Yates Satterlee and craftsmen like William Cleland have refashioned that under water calcium carbonate into new open-air intricacies of architecture and sculpture animated not by life but by a living idea. Where colorful fish once streamed through coral corridors, now bright processions of priests and worshippers, docents and tourists progress along its sun-drenched aisles.

From one end of the Cathedral to the other, physical and metaphysical interweave. The Cathedral as it stands represents the power of art to illuminate the spiritual. As Paul Klee said, "... (to) render visible the invisible."

In a real sense, Gothic architecture, the great intellectual adventure of the Middle Ages, may rightly be thought of as the first functional style of architecture, because the actual structural elements, the flying buttresses, stand in plain view, and they are completely integrated into the aesthetic design. Masons invented flying buttresses to counteract the stresses brought about by wind loading in tall stone walls. Ultimately, however, the flyers serve the purposes of poetry, and spiritual poetry at that, because by relieving the walls of stress and bearing the massive tonnage of the vaults and roof, they make way for the curtains of stained glass that paint the interior walls in an ever-changing rhapsody of colored light that never fails to enthrall.

The Cathedral speaks many languages; it reaches out to us in sights and sounds, movements and words. It also eloquently speaks another of mankind's most cherished common languages-- the language of the hand. It evokes from all people a primeval enchantment with things well made. Every cubic inch of stone and wood, iron and glass, fabric and paint brilliantly recalls the skill, sincerity, and dedication of the makers. Every visible surface bears the trace of the hand. No worker ever spared any effort or accepted any compromise. As the Cathedral immerses us in such a tidal wash of the best of human exertion, it moves us closer to the best within ourselves.

Whatever spiritual path we walk, the Cathedral addresses our innermost being. Even when we cannot translate their subtle theological meanings with minute precision, the imagery of the Cathedral, formed of so many materials, in such a wide range of style, and with such multi-layered symbolism invites us out of ordinary time and space and acquaints us with a grace of form that confirms and transfigures our own humanity.

If we think of this entire edifice-- one hundred fifty thousand tons of masonry rising above forty foot deep foundations, eighty-three years building and still being fashioned in its last details-- as culminating here, at the Jerusalem Altar and the *Ter Sanctus Reredos*, then the Cathedral asks us to contemplate our place in the grand scheme. In the holy of holies, we see Christ majestically enthroned amid ninety-six carved representations of his forerunners and followers, but most significantly framed by six allegorical figures that embody the finest distillation of the meaning of this whole place. They visually signify words of Jesus recorded in the twenty-fifth chapter of the book of Matthew: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me. ... Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Jesus' great contemporary and fellow Rabbi, Hillel, spoke words that closely resonate with these: "If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am for myself alone, what then am I? And if not now, then when?" These essences of Judeo/Christian spiritual thought touch us all, because they draw upon the wisdom of the ages. And they strike a particularly deep chord in me as a sculptor, because they lend human substance to an abstract conception that lies at the core of my art-- proportion.

They ask us to consider the right measure of the parts to the whole, of the self to the other. At its climactic magnificence of art and architecture, from the very heart of its ritual space, this building counsels charity, humility, patience, and tolerance.

That is why, in our century, hungry and longing for a spiritual center amid self-inflicted storms of suffering and drifting in a self-centered wilderness of plenty, the Cathedral emerges as a living idea. It is no accident that when he established a school to explore the universal nature of the language of architecture, art, design, and craft, Walter Gropius called it, "Bauhaus," the "house of building," a name directly derived from, "bauhütten," the "builders lodges" that housed the interdisciplinary teams of masons, carpenters, carvers, sculptors, glaziers, plumbers, and iron smiths, who working together over a span of ten generations, cloaked Medieval Europe in a numinous mantle of churches.

We have perhaps unfairly romanticized those ancestral artisans into a perfect model of human collaboration imagining them toiling anonymously endless hours in pious equanimity. Undoubtedly many were even-tempered and some were even pious, but work like this does not go forward without the sweat, tears, and laughter of red-blooded human beings. We can safely assume that like ours their labors were too often moved by base ambition, too often troubled by petty jealousy, perhaps not often enough enlivened by raucous laughter, and always tempered by untimely failure. But despite their faults and foibles, they succeeded in the long run at summoning the best from within themselves. Sustained excellence of effort is their legacy to us as much as the magnificent heaps of stone that they assembled. Can we set for a better goal for ourselves? The idea of a mutually supportive community of creative minds, skilled hands, and compassionate hearts must compel the imagination not just of artists, but of all people who value a humane future.

Some have called art museums the Cathedrals of the twentieth century, partly because we have fervently built so many of them, and partly for being meeting places for all the arts and havens for the spiritually inclined. Some have called film making the Cathedral of the twentieth century for its incorporation of literature, drama, music, dance, and all manner of visual imagery into a single art form. Some have called the space program the invisible Cathedral for the unparalleled scientific imagination, technical brilliance, and intrepid sense of adventure that it marshals on such a vast scale. Some have called the university the Cathedral of the twentieth century for the breadth and depth of its academic, practical, and artistic genius. We can find much truth in these notions, to the extent that each emulates the Cathedral's example of individual achievement within common enterprise, and to the extent that each strives to match the matchless enduring vision of the Cathedral. This building like its predecessors was conceived and begun by men and women who knew that they would not live to see its completion. They found gratification in faith, the faith of their religion-- in their spiritual destiny-- certainly, but another dimension of faith, too: faith that the Cathedral would offer what people always need no matter what the future might bring, faith that the Cathedral would always stand ready to give any visitor-- devout pilgrim or casual tourist-- a generous measure of spiritual nurture: selfless pride in real accomplishment, ennobling humility at tasks that

remain undone, and continual wonder at the mystery of man's creativity in God's creation.

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