

The Gothic Cathedral

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Among the original and artistic achievements of the Middle Ages, none is more reflective of the creativity and genius of the period than the Gothic Cathedral. The Middle Ages presented a cultural and religious unity which was unique in history; the source of that unity was a Christian conviction which the citizens of the society all shared. The dichotomy between the secular and the sacred was in this period transcended, since the divine was held always and invariably to express itself in the human, while the human had no reality apart from the divine which it existed to display.

It is the purpose of this article to discuss the Gothic Cathedral in terms of its genius in reflecting the spirit of the era. Here the descriptive adjective, not the noun, is the carrying power of all that will be said. A Cathedral can exist in any type of architecture. It is by definition the seat of a bishop, which means that any church in which a bishop happens to be located is a cathedral. But a Gothic Cathedral, considered as an architectural type or artistic class, is unique. The thirteenth century in Western Europe erected it, and it is itself wondrous and glorious, to which nothing else that has ever been built can be compared.

Gothic architecture has been characterized by three major features. They are the pointed arch, the rib-vault, and the flying buttress. No one of them is a unique Gothic creation. Each had been known and used prior to the erection of the first Gothic edifice. Indeed, unless I am mistaken, and I do not profess competence in either the science of architecture or the field of the fine arts, the nave of Durham Cathedral, which outdates the beginning of Gothic by almost a century, displays the rib-vault. What

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makes Gothic Gothic is the combined use of these three features in such a way that a new architectural pattern is produced.

The purpose, simply and clearly, was to give movement and animation to what had heretofore been inert masses of mortar and stone. In Gothic a building almost becomes an enclosed field of action and transformation. Whether it is viewed externally or internally, the Gothic Cathedral has the appearance of motion and change. Whereas the Greek temple was designed to produce in the beholder the mood of peace and tranquility which is related to absolute stability and changelessness, the Gothic Cathedral, in contrast, excites and stimulates its visitor, creating in him a mood of eager expectancy and of desire for immediate and positive action.

When one enters Chartres Cathedral, for example, he sees at once its three-tier elevation demonstrated on both sides of the nave by the high pointed arcade, the dainty little gallery, so exquisitely carved, above it, and the tall stately clerestory composed of dark, subdued stained glass windows. Over each window is a small rose-shaped supplement in the same haunting colors, which makes the walls quadripartite, though they do not have the triforium, or low wall passage between gallery and clerestory, which characterizes the cathedrals both of Noyon and of Laon. Notre Dame in Paris reverses the order of Chartres by placing the little circular windows below the big windows of the clerestory, so that they actually take the place of the triforium. Both Rheims and Amiens, built later in the century, reproduce almost exactly the pattern of Chartres, though on a grander scale.

One is dazzled by the height of the nave. In the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris it is 115 feet, while in Rheims it is 125, and Amiens reaches up to 140 feet. But at the same time, competing with the height of the nave, is the length. One cannot think about the width or sides at first. He is either looking up or forward, and always his sight is moving. The narrow arcades and their taper-like columns, or piers, take one along breathlessly until before he knows it he has moved from narthex to apse. Thus the balance of the Gothic Cathedral is a precarious one. Indeed, it is like the balance of power "among restless and warlike nations." It appears almost to shift either to height or length without ever doing it. This balance is obtained by maintaining the tension between two powerful and opposite directions. The slender spires constantly point one upward in his gaze, but arcades, aisles, and altar contest to draw him forward as well. He cannot be at rest really in a Gothic Cathedral.

This tension, so grippingly expressed by the interior of the cathedral, was what medieval man always felt within himself. His life from birth to death was a constant battle. He strove to obey God, but always the Devil harassed and hindered him. He loved above all else sanctity and holiness,

and yet his deeds were compromised by sin. Religion was never solace or comfort or tranquility for the people of the Middle Ages. Theirs was struggle against temptation and victory over sin. They knew there was no crown unless first there had been a cross. This theology patterned the Gothic Cathedral.

The outside of the Gothic Cathedral teaches its lessons as well. Exterior and interior are architecturally and aesthetically in complete harmony with one another. This is because both were theologically conceived. Everything about the edifice proclaims its religious design. Since the exterior of the cathedral shows so much of the constructional elements that hold it in place, it is easy perhaps to miss its artistic nicety and exactness. One is too apt to think of it as the back of the stage, the equipment, so to speak, which enables the play to go on inside. The flying buttresses appear to be no more than exposed beams which hold the walls upright and keep them from being pushed out and wrecked by the arches and vaults. A Romanesque Church, in contrast to the Gothic, keeps her buttresses entirely concealed, for according to her style it would be indecent for a church, like a person, to expose her ribs. When one looks at the apse of St. Sernin in Toulouse, France, he finds straight black and white walls on the outside. The buttresses are built in and hidden. St. Sernin is one of the most perfect examples of the Romanesque in existence. But the cathedrals in Paris, Rheims, and Amiens are all exposed. Indeed, the flying buttresses and high towers and spires create externally the same tension that is created by height and length of the nave inside. When one stands outside the cathedral, he struggles to look upward and outward at the same time. That is why distance is always needed to gain proper perspective. One does not really see the cathedral externally until he sees it upward and outward at the same time.

No Gothic Cathedral from the outside ever looks complete. It is not supposed to. It stands as a reminder of the incompleteness of all things temporal. Its upward and outward thrust points one both to God and to the needs of his neighbor. He is lifted heavenward to God to find satisfaction. He is pushed outward on earth among all peoples to diffuse the grace of God among them.

There is no discrimination between the importance of exterior and interior in the Gothic Cathedral. The Greek temple put its stress entirely on the outside. The wonder of the Acropolis and the glory of the Parthenon are seen in their approach. This is because mind and body, the intellect and the physical physique which it governed, were supreme to the Greeks. But mind and spirit represent separate avenues of approach to God for the medieval man. He is to cultivate his natural resources, for they have been given him as divine gifts. But nature as such is always incomplete until

it has been perfected by divine grace. One beholds the strength and symmetry of the Gothic Cathedral from the outside and is awed by its grandeur. But he has not really seen it all or benefited from its lessons until he has gone inside to pray and to worship. The outside of the cathedral which explains itself architecturally by exposing all its parts, displays the order and dependability of the world and nature and is a picture of the philosophy. But the inside, where all is concealed and hidden, is a picture of the ultimate mystery, the being of God which must be grasped by faith and accepted in love.

When one settles down to study it and to examine its contents and parts, the Gothic Cathedral teaches a very definite religious and theological lesson. There is nothing about Gothic that is problematical. It was designed for instruction. The vast majority of the people of the Middle Ages could not read or write. Their cathedrals and churches became for them the means of their instruction in the things of God. No times, not excepting even the present, have vied with the Middle Ages in the skill and success of visual religious aids. The medieval man could see all the lessons of his faith in his cathedral. Everything he found in it had a particular religious meaning for him.

The very position, the geographical setting, of the church building itself, taught the medieval Christian a lesson. It was always so placed that its head was toward the rising of the sun. The end of the church was to the west, so that the late afternoon sun would light up the stained glass containing scenes of the Judgment and end of the world. The northern wall and its windows dealt with Old Testament scenes and images, while the southern exposure carried in its windows the gospel of the New Testament.

As in the New Testament, so in the medieval Cathedral the higher place in a design represents the greater honor. For example, in the tympanum of Chartres Cathedral, Christ the regal Savior sits enthroned and on either side of him are the symbols of the four evangelists. On his upper right and left are the man and the eagle, while below in the same order are the lion and the ox, and likewise man, on the right, has priority over any bird, even the noble eagle, which is on the left.

The humble Christian learned the nature and order of hierarchy from his cathedral. At Chartres in the right bay of the south porch we can see all this in stone. There the saints are grouped around the arches, but these groups are very carefully arranged, so that laymen, monks, priests, bishops, and archbishops are kept in their respective groups in an ascending hierarchic scale. At the crown of the arch is a saintly pope. Even the celestial choir is pictured in classes. Angels are below archangels, while cherubim and seraphim are closest to Deity and therefore are pictured

carrying flames and balls of fire which radiate from the source of all light and splendor.

When one looks closely at some of the magnificent statuary of Chartres, he sees that major figures usually stand on some diminutive figure that bears significance to his mission and work. The statue of Balaam is supported by the ass. The Queen of Sheba stands on the shoulders of a Negro. Moses rests his feet on the head and back of the golden calf. Maybe the medieval worshiper could not read his Bible, but he was taught its lessons. He saw its stories pictured for him in stone and glass, as today you and I substitute for the reading of a novel the dramatization of it on television.

From his cathedral the untutored Christian acquired his knowledge of nature and the arts and sciences as well as religion. This book in stone was more than a single volume. It was a whole library. Information from the bestiaries is found on its walls as well as truths of the Bible. By carvings and scenes in stained glass the medieval man came to believe that the owl cannot see so well in day as it can at night, that in ordinary light other birds chase the owl, and he is helpless because of blindness. Imagination played with reality in the cathedral, and the worshiper found out what unicorns and dragons and gargoyles were without ever coming to see them in real life. All the flowers of France find permanence inside the French cathedrals, and a course in botany could better have been taught inside these Gothic edifices in the Middle Ages than inside the universities. Those great cathedrals came to be epitomes of the whole wide world. Their artists wanted them to be like Noah's ark, housing something of every living species.

Nothing in practical instruction, however, was quite so important as the moral life. Instruction in the pursuit of virtue and the avoidance of vice was invariably treated by the artists of the Gothic Cathedrals. It is not possible to go into any one of these churches and to find this theme absent. Equally interesting and fascinating in their presentation are the twelve virtues and vices, always depicted in pairs, seen at Notre Dame in Paris, Chartres, and Amiens. Let us look briefly at just one or two of these portrayals in order to understand how the artist went about teaching his lessons on morals to the people. One can readily recognize these theological virtues which invariably begin the series of the twelve.

Look at the artist's portrayal of faith. This virtue is personified as a woman. She has the seat of honor on the right side of Christ. In her hand she holds a shield on which, in the window of Notre Dame, is a cross, while in the stone work at Chartres is a chalice, and at Amiens, a cross in a chalice. On the north porch at Chartres the woman actually fills the chalice with the blood of the Lamb of God who is slain on the altar. What does

this mean? It means that in the Middle Ages the object of faith was the death of Christ for our sins on the cross. But this faith was not in an act that took place once and for all in the past but in the perpetuity of that sacrifice, miraculously renewed every time the mass is performed on the altar. In contrast to the lovely maiden faith, we see at Paris, Chartres, and Amiens a man kneeling down and worshipping an animal-like idol, presumably a donkey. Medieval people had the habit of abusing the donkey by using him in their art in an uncomplimentary way.

The sheep, in contrast, is generally used in the most complimentary way. In Notre Dame, for example, charity is presented as a woman with a shield which has a sheep on it. Yet every person in the Middle Ages knew what this meant. A sheep personified to him complete unselfishness. Rupert of Troy has given the explanation beautifully: "The sheep gives her flesh for food to those who are strong, her milk to those who are weak; with her fleece she clothes the naked, and with her skin she shelters the cold."

Let us look at just one other pair. Chastity is presented in a most unusual manner. This virtue is a maiden with the veil of her virginity over her head. In one hand she has a palm, the sign of victory over the lusts of the flesh, while in the other she carries a shield with an animal or bird as it is enveloped in flames. No doubt the animal is supposed to be the salamander. This animal was thought to live in the flames and to have the property of extinguishing them. Even so chastity must endure the fire of concupiscence and sexual desire until finally it extinguishes them. Luxury, or indulgence, contrasted with chastity, is a young man holding a young woman in his arms, and the woman has in one hand a sceptre, illustrating her absolute rule over man in the satisfaction of his sexual passions, and in the other a mirror, indicating that her satisfaction in life lies in beholding her own beauty and admiring herself.

The Gothic Cathedral not only taught the people of the Middle Ages what they needed to know about nature, the arts, the world, and virtue, it gave them instruction in religion, in the contents of the Bible, and above all else in the doctrines of their faith. Let us turn now to a summary of these, and our lesson on the Gothic Cathedral will be done.

The artists and sculptors began of course with the Old Testament. Indeed, the most beautiful stained glass windows I have ever seen were not at Chartres Cathedral, as might be expected. The colors there are too dark and subdued for me. I have scarcely ever found enough light through them properly to enjoy their scenes. The most beautiful stained glass I have found is the windows in La Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, where practically the whole of the Old Testament is illustrated. The colors are so light and vivid that it is very easy to study the scenes. What one quickly sees from all of

them is that the medieval Christians did not consider the Old Testament as important in itself but only as prefiguring the New. For them it was all prophecy, the fulfillment of which took place in the acts and deeds of Jesus Christ and of His church.

Take this example: When Moses saw the burning bush and heard God speak out of it to him, this was of course an historical fact. It happened as the Bible describes it. The medieval man believed this. But to him it prefigured something else. It was an allegory of the Virgin Mary. She received in her body the flame of the Holy Ghost, yet she was not consumed by the fire of concupiscence. Hence in Gothic art she can be seen using Moses and his burning bush as her stance. There is a particularly handsome statue of her on the north porch at Chartres, and beneath her feet is the burning bush.

Both patriarchs and kings were used as types, proclaiming the Messiah who in their times was yet to come. I looked time and again at Rheims at that row of statues of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Simeon. Better still, in the north porch at Chartres are Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and David, all of whom stand at the very entrance of the church. In the windows of La Sainte-Chapelle are Adam, Abel, Melchizedek, and Joseph. David and Solomon are there, too, and at Chartres, Amiens, and Rheims Solomon is always placed near the Queen of Sheba. What did the medieval man get from all this?

When he saw Adam, he was confronted by his own ruination in him, reminded of original sin, and directed away from the first Adam to the second Adam, Jesus Christ, who came as redeemer and deliverer. Melchizedek, who was both king and priest, and who gave bread and wine to Abraham, was prophetic of the eucharist, when we eat the consecrated wafer with the life-giving properties of the divine. The mind of the medieval Christian was perpetually on Christ. He sought and found Him everywhere.

In Notre Dame at Paris there is a stone relief of the burial of the Virgin Mary. Young St. John, who looked after her in her years of life after the crucifixion, heads the procession. The coffin itself is borne by Peter and Paul. Peter, Prince of the Apostles, is at the head, while Paul, less than the least of all the saints, brings up the rear. The burial, resurrection, and coronation of the Virgin is pictured in stone above one of the doors at Amiens.

Medieval people believed firmly in heaven and hell, and they depended on the saints helping them to attain the one and to avoid the other. Consequently the saints were much more than figures out of history to them. They were constantly available ministering angels. The child got his own special saint, his patron saint, at his baptism. Likewise trade guilds and professions each had a patron saint. Men and women believed in these

saints as credulous children believe in Santa Claus. They loved them with intense devotion.

The favorite saint to everybody was of course the Virgin Mary. She was the Mother of God Incarnate. She was the vehicle of man's redemption, because the Redeemer had come through her womb. Medieval man looked on her as the personification of the church. He felt perhaps that he could get a little closer to her than to her divine Son. At least he depended on her to put in a good word for him with Jesus. God the Son would listen to her, since He was once her little boy and she had nurtured and reared Him. Consequently the cult of the Virgin Mary was one of the strongest expressions of medieval piety.

Very little from the gospels about Jesus is pictured in Gothic art. What has been represented is events connected mainly with His birth, His death, and His resurrection. Medieval man was interested in Him not just as an historical figure, but as the embodiment of God in the work of redemption He had performed, in His indispensable role as Savior. The lessons of this art of the Gothic Cathedrals are theological lessons. Events always are important for what they mean. The world and all that is in it was framed by the Word of God, and all will pass away but that Word, which is eternal.

When I first saw Mont-Saint-Michel on the Norman Coast, the top of its sharp spires was lost in heavy clouds. That magnificent structure looked as if it had transcended earth and pierced heaven. Indeed, it had. The Gothic Cathedral is like a prayer. It constantly reaches skyward. It lifts man into the very presence of God.