

Sacred Space

The sacred house of God arises from living stones

Dr. Angela M. T. Reinders

„I wouldn't want to live in a world without cathedrals. Their beauty and majesty are things I need. I need them to counter the banality of the world. I want to look up to shining church windows and be dazzled by their unearthly colors. I need their brilliance. I need it against the dirty sameness of uniforms. I want to envelope myself in the crisp coolness of churches. I need their forbidding silence. [...] I love praying people. I need to see them. I need them against the malevolent poison of superficiality and thoughtlessness. [...] A world without these things would be a world in which I would not want to live.“¹ These are words spoken by Pascal Mercier's fictional character Amadeu Prado, whose life is traced in the novel „Nighttrain to Lisbon“. It is almost with anger that the hero of the novel defends the world's hallowed spaces against the world, as a sign of warning for the world.

While it is true that the church and the people who celebrate liturgy within its walls, praying there and finding community with God and each other, are unable to forget the profane world outside (what would service to God be without service to man?), it is just as true that the sacred and the spaces which are its dwelling places remain inaccessible to mankind. God is „the Holy One“. Thus says the liturgy. Yet God is not only the holy one when men sing and say these words, acknowledging Him as the holy one. God is holy prior to any words of man. He remains inaccessible to man.

„Space“, „makom“ as dwelling place of the shekhina, God's wisdom, is so-to-speak one name for this holy, inaccessible God.² God, who is space and bestows, bestows on mankind the space in which he may live. Those who receive and feel space as a gift from the hand of God believe that God is all around their life space and remains present there. In this way, mankind is able to meet Him there:

Moses goes beyond the space within whose clearly marked boundaries he normally moves. One day, taking a bold decision, he drives the herds of sheep and goats

which he is shepherding „to the west side of the wilderness“ (Ex 3,1). By going beyond his own boundaries, it becomes possible for him to encounter God. Yet the holy space of God is, literally a „no-go“ area, an inaccessible space: „Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground“ (Ex 3,5).

Surrounded by God, the Holy One, who grants life-space, man is able to live in the world. „For mankind, living means having a place to be with oneself, to encounter oneself and to encounter others with whom one is intimate. As a third dimension, sacral spaces add meeting with the other, with God.“³

Space paths

In other religions and cultures, this sense of the third dimension was initially more important than in Christianity. Mircea Eliade, Romanian theologian (1907–1986), raises our awareness of the mythical feeling of space into consciousness, according to which man makes a distinction between „meaningful“ and „amorphous“ space. Those crossing from the fragile and fissured amorphous space into the meaningful, cross thresholds – first the threshold „home“ of their own domicile, and then the threshold to holy space. The current renaissance of the idea of a „homeland“ reveals to us that even today man still has a feeling for this mythical spatial thinking.⁴ Sacral and „[...] church buildings [...] show the person entering that in doing so he has crossed over the threshold of the realm of the everyday with its pragmatic constraints, and has entered another „horizon of the senses“. [They are ...] pointers to something transcending the everyday world but even so quite literally, in terms of space and urban architecture, are very often the center of the everyday world.“⁵ From time immemorial, the thresholds to the holy sanctum were that which made the numinous, the inaccessibility of a cult within its meaningful boundaries tangible. Often, in newly converted parts of the world the Christian world has understood how to preserve the continuity of a holy sanctum, a holy place or space. There, where for hundreds of years mankind has worshipped other gods, other rites and other cults, the Christian God took his place.⁶

Christianity itself began its own history in enmity and persecution. It was three hundred years before Christian communities were finally able to occupy their own

space, finding their way out of private houses, secret meeting places and catacombs. One of the most well-known kinds of church, the basilica, are in fact not genuinely Christian. The court and „multi-purpose halls“ of antiquity now took on new destinies as examples of Christian places of worship. There were at last large buildings accessible to all, adapted to how Christian worship itself evolved over the centuries. Buildings gradually became „built liturgy“. The space was rendered holy by what transpired there: the celebration of the congregation with and in God⁷; this dimension became part of what the choice of place of encounter with the holy God laid down.

At the place of healing power

There was a close connection between liturgical events in the holy space of the church and the close connection between the way the space was organized and the image the church had at that time. Against the background of his age and its predominant theology, as a boy Charlemagne could hardly have conceived this image in any other way than that of rendering visible the holy legitimization of the power of the monarch as representative of God's kingdom on earth.⁸ This had also been reflected in church-building at the time of Constantine and Justinian.⁹ In building his church as king, Charlemagne's aim was to give visible expression of his own piety and God-given power. We can imagine him asking himself two questions. Firstly, where to have it built, and secondly, how it should be built. There is sufficient proof that Charlemagne held Aachen in great esteem – chiefly because of the healing powers of its hot springs and its strategically advantageous position.¹⁰

In the fourth or fifth centuries, the Franconian forerunner of the octagon we know today had itself been built, mindful of the sanctity of the location, on the site of Roman buildings, which included a hot-spring bath. That Granus, the Gallo-romanic god of healing, was worshipped here in earlier times is very probable.¹¹ A baptistry, which was part of an earlier building from the time of Pippin, provided the spring water with its power of healing, thus making “living water” (Joh 4,13) available for the sacrament. Later (most certainly prior to 765), a relic altar rebuilt with a chapel was built in this small church building. This formed the core for Charlemagne's project.¹²

The liturgy which was to be celebrated later in „his“ church, would become an essential part of the process of establishing a common liturgy within his empire,

which Charlemagne set in motion. Rather than his own private palace chapel, his intention was to create, as became increasingly common in the 8th century¹³, a church consecrated to the Virgin – the „Queen of Heaven“ – , affording space for the daily celebration of mass at different altars in turn, for the choir prayer of the canonical community there present and for prayers for Charlemagne and the *stabilitas regni*, the divinely determined sovereignty of the king.¹⁴

In what way should such a holy space be erected and how should it look? Even when Charlemagne himself presented the plan¹⁵, the chamber which he desired to have built must have seemed struck him as still strange, still unimaginable. Such an approach to a holy space as strange accords with its ultimate inaccessibility: „At home I'm only alone with myself; there, where my songs are sung, my language spoken, my favorite texts quoted from, exactly in the way I like them,“ says Fulbert Steffensky (*1933), theological pedagogue from Hamburg. „At home I'm only alone with myself – what a suffocating home to contemplate! [...] To be alone with oneself does not suffice – this is the lesson which, little by little, life teaches man. I need more than only myself. I also need the other. I need the thoughts, gestures and games of faith of my older and younger brothers and sisters. I need the songs of the dead.“ It is important to learn and give expression to this faith „[...] also in the language of my brothers and sisters, which I only half command or which is completely strange to me.“¹⁶

That this language is also able to grasp quite foreign tongues and can span all the world: this is what Charlemagne translated into the plans for his Church of the Virgin. In the year 787 he found inspiration in San Vitale, the central-plan building in Ravenna, itself following on in terms of intellectual and architectural tradition from the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. On Charlemagne's orders, master builder Odo von Metz supervised the construction of the first large dome ever to be built north of the Alps.¹⁷ Charlemagne blended many elements into his holy space. He introduced the unusual and the unfamiliar, including the very idea of a central-plan building in this region.¹⁸ He retained traditional elements of Roman architecture – for construction of the chamber, arches now characteristically sacral, but modeled on Roman triumphal ones – and materials – the remainders of walls from the pre-Pippin era, which he had ground and turned into mortar, so as to be able to build foundations on new

architectural principles.¹⁹ Pope Hadrian (772-795) gave Charlemagne written permission to have fourth to sixth century columns and marble transported from Ravenna to Aachen.²⁰ In the holy space of his Church of the Virgin, Charlemagne sought to underlay the influence of „foreign tongues“ in the history of ideas with a familiar biblical atmosphere. Those crossing the threshold into this holy space were meant to recognize the „native language“ of the first and second testaments. With existing buildings as its model, the “eightness” of the octagon, whose exterior was originally red²¹, picked up on biblical symbolism: the survivors of the flood, Zacharias’ visions about Jahweh’s plan to raise Jerusalem from its ruins, the beatitudes, and the day of Jesus’ resurrection (counted from the beginning of the previous week) according to Luke 24,1.²²

The unit of measurement, the foot of the Franks, translated the global concept for the construction of the church into numerical proportions, corresponding to the apocalyptic number of saved in the bible (Rev 7,4-8). According to the testimony of Alkuin, Charlemagne’s „minister of culture“, the Emperor’s goal was to portray in stone and on earth the biblical image of the holy city of Jerusalem (also measuring 144 feet according to biblical sources) and to render visible and touchable with recognizable echoes from the temple in Jerusalem the divine command inspiring the building of this structure.²³ When the Church of the Virgin was no longer able to accommodate the stream of pilgrims, the problem of space was solved by the construction of a gothic choir in place of the small Carolingian one, beginning in the 14th century. With its architecture and numerical symbolism, featuring twelve pillars supported by the twelve apostles with two additional pillars depicting the Virgin and Charlemagne as supports, the choir became a self-contained image of the heavenly Jerusalem, the „image of a kingdom promising redemption“²⁴. The degree of transparency of the walls of Aachen’s „glass house“ (as the choir is known) was the highest achievable up to that time. This was to capture the light of the heavenly city within the holy space, shining „clear as crystal“ (Rev 21,11).²⁵ From the heights of the unmistakably gothic verticality, heaven can float down, engage with the world of men, so that pious and praying, they may approach.²⁶

Later, the ring of chapels was added to the building, rooms affording something of home to the pilgrims, who, in the holy treasures of Aachen, were able to encounter

the objects they longed for, and the revelation of their own longings for God: „Man must learn to understand the nature of his quest. His first quest is to discover himself. What remains for him to understand is that he can only truly find himself through others and in close proximity to Christ.“²⁷ The Hungarian chapel in particular is proof as to how holy spaces symbolize and reinforce relationships which have grown²⁸, as if they were a house which only arises from living stones.

House of living stones

Church housing relics, burial place of Charlemagne, coronation church, church of bishops (1802 for a short period and since 1930 up to the present): Aachen Cathedral is, of course, all of these.²⁹ Yet these labels leave things about the cathedral unsaid – to regard this as a building built for a purpose denies it the dimension which really gives it its identity. „Aachen’s Church of the Virgin has been and will always be something more than merely an historic and fascinating cultural location of museum-like beauty and cultural reminiscence. It has been and still is a holy and awe-inspiring place.“³⁰ The inscription which Charlemagne meant to describe its purpose will be there as long as the building remains in existence: „Cum lapides vivi pacis compage ligantur – God’s holy house arises from living stones“³¹. „Where else can we bring our feelings“³², with faith and searching, with need and pleasure? The holy space saves and keeps all that has been spoken, wept, kissed and lamented, prayed for and silently hoped for, confessed and kept secret; everything which this „strange“ holy space first raised into the consciousness of those praying.

„[...] But for the people who have continued to pray here in this cathedral over its 1200-year history, the cathedral would have long since disappeared and today Aachen would probably be a only village offering hot springs and preservable biscuits“³³, is the provocative observation made by Christoph Stender, rector of Aachen’s university. However, faith remains present in the „living stones“. Those entering the cathedral cross the threshold to the bible’s wide promise: „And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and

death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." And he who sat upon the throne said, „Behold, I make all things new." (Rev 21,2-5a).

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¹ MERCIER, Pascal, Nightrain to Lisbon. Roman, München ¹³2006, 198.

² MOLTMANN, Jürgen, Gott und Raum, in: ders./RIVUZUMWAMI, Carmen (Hg.), Wo ist Gott? Gottesräume – Lebensräume, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2002, 29-41; hier: 33.

³ GERHARDS, Albert, Sinn und Sinnlichkeit sakraler Räume. Kirchenraumpädagogik ist im Kommen, in: Herder Korrespondenz 60 (2006), 150f.

⁴ ELIADE, Mircea, Das Heilige und das Profane. Vom Wesen des Religiösen, Frankfurt am Main 1984; vgl. HOFMEISTER, Klaus/BAUEROCHSE, Lothar (Hg.), Wissen, wo man hingehört. Heimat als neues

Lebensgefühl, Würzburg 2006. Der Band erschien zur gleichnamigen Sendereihe auf dem Kultursender hr2 (Hessischer Rundfunk) ab Oktober 2006.

⁵ SOEFFNER, Hans-Georg, Kirchliche Gebäude – Orte der christlichen Religion in der pluralistischen Kultur; in: SCHWEBEL, Hort/LUDWIG, Matthias (Hg.), Kirchen in der Stadt, Marburg 1993, 51-55, hier: 52.

⁶ vgl. z.B. BAUS, Charlemagne/EWIG, Eugen, Die Reichskirche nach Konstantin dem Großen. Erster Halbband: Die Kirche von Nikaia bis Chalkedon [= JEDIN, Hubert (Hg.), Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte, II/1], Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1979, 213.

⁷ Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, Umnutzung von Kirchen. Beurteilungskriterien und Entscheidungshilfen (= Arbeitshilfe 175), 24. September 2003, 10-13.

⁸ vgl. KEMPF, Friedrich/BECK, Hans-Georg/EWIG, Eugen/JUNGMANN, Josef Andreas, Die mittelalterliche Kirche. Erster Halbband: vom kirchlichen Frühmittelalter zur gregorianischen Reform [= JEDIN, Hubert (Hg.), Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte, III/1], Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1973, 97-118. Wenngleich die Planung und Ausführung der Kaiserkrönung Charlemagnes vorausging und hinter dem Bau der Aachener Marienkirche kein „imperiales“ Gesamtkonzept zu stehen scheint, vgl. KERNER, Max, Einführung. Der Aachener Dom. Vom Wunderwerk des 9. Jahrhunderts zur Bischofskirche unserer Zeit, in: ders., (Hg.), Der Aachener Dom als Ort geschichtlicher Erinnerung. Werkbuch der Studierenden des Historischen Instituts der RWTH Aachen, Köln 2004, 1-7, hier: 11.

⁹ vgl. MICHEL, Julia, Vorbildkirchen der Aachener Marienkirche, in: KERNER, Max (Hg.), 131-146, hier: 136.

¹⁰ vgl. GRIMME, Ernst Günther, Der Dom zu Aachen, Aachen 2000, 13.

¹¹ vgl. STEPHANY, Erich, Der Dom zu Aachen, Aachen ²⁵1991, 3.

¹² vgl. GRIMME, Ernst Günther, 11-13, KERNER, Max, 3.

¹³ vgl. KEMPF, Friedrich/BECK, Hans-Georg/EWIG, Eugen/JUNGMANN, Josef Andreas [= JEDIN, Hubert (Hg.), Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte, III/1], 361.

¹⁴ vgl. KERNER, Max, 12; GEIS, Lioba, Überlegungen zur Liturgie in der Aachener Marienkirche, in: KERNER, Max (Hg.), 555-574, hier: 555-557.

¹⁵ vgl. GRIMME, Ernst Günther, 14.

¹⁶ STEFFENSKY, Fulbert, Das Haus, das die Träume verwaltet, Würzburg ⁷2002, 10.

¹⁷ vgl. GRIMME, Ernst Günther, 14f. 22; MICHEL, Julia, 133-139.

¹⁸ vgl. MICHEL, Julia, 132.

¹⁹ vgl. GRIMME, Ernst Günther, 17f. 26.

²⁰ vgl. ebd., 22; vgl. KERNER, Max, 5; vgl. MICHEL, Julia, 136.

²¹ vgl. KERNER, Max, 3.

²² vgl. WYNANDS, Dieter, P.J., Zur Symbolik der Zahl Acht – ausgehend von der Aachener Marienkirche, in: KERNER, Max (Hg.), 165-183, hier: 171ff.

²³ vgl. KERNER, Max, 4; SCHLÜTTER, Johannes, Wi(e)der die Pfalzkapelle – das Bild der Aachener Marienkirche in der historischen Forschung, in: KERNER, Max (Hg.), 13-25, hier: 23.

²⁴ WYNANDS; Dieter P.J., 521.

²⁵ RONNENBERG; Karsten C., Das Aachener Glashaus – zur Entstehung und Deutung der choirhalle der Aachener Marienkirche, in KERNER, Max (Hg.), 509-526, hier: 522-524.

²⁶ vgl. ebd., 521.

²⁷ Kommt, und ihr werdet sehen! (Joh 1,39), zur Aachener Heiligtumsfahrt 2007, für den Entwurf: Dr. Herbert Hammans, redaktionelle Überarbeitung: (Okt. 2006) Dr. Andreas Frick.

²⁸ vgl. FUSENIG, Annette, Ausblick. Aachen – „der Ort, an dem das Abendland entstanden ist ...“ Interview mit Horst FUHRMANN, in: KERNER,, Max (Hg.), 631-637, hier: 634.

²⁹ vgl. GRIMME, Ernst Günther, 38.41.122.

³⁰ KERNER, Max, 7.

³¹ ebd., 5.

³² Eine Lehrerin aus Erfurt, die eine Gruppe jüngerer Schülerinnen und Schüler nach dem Amoklauf 2002 am Gutenberg-Gymnasium begleitete, zitiert nach BARTH, Hermann, Heilige Räume. Vortrag bei der Veranstaltungsreihe „Treffpunkt Marktkirche“ in Hannover, 2. April 2003, www.ekd.de/vortraege/barth/030402_barth.html [18. Januar 2007].

³³ STENDER, Christoph, Domgefühl und Schatzeinsichten. Buchpräsentation. Pressekonferenz, Einhard am Dom, 11. August 2005, www.christoph-stender.de/texte/domgefuehl.html [18.Januar 2007].