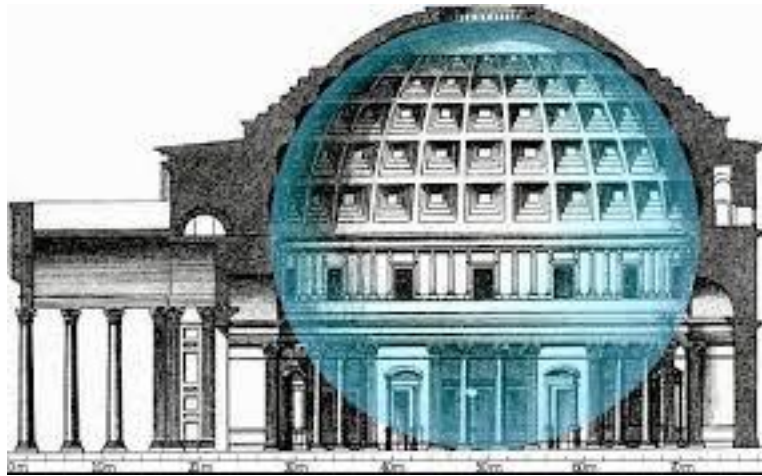


Daily Lenten Devotional
Friday, April 18, 2025
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45—Light of the First Day



I did not begin to understand Gothic Cathedrals, or the great churches of the 12-14 centuries in England and France, I did not grasp the power and meaning of these churches until I saw this picture. The Gothic Cathedral is a wild and unbounded collection of circles, spheres, orbs, planets, stars, symbols of the eternal.

Everything from the obvious circular Rose windows of Notre Dame in Paris or the labyrinth in the floor of Chartres, from these obvious examples was now added the partial: the arch, the ambulatory, the rosettes, the vaults. Once I could see the circles they exploded in my sight. They were everywhere.

At first I thought this idea was just my imagination. I was "seeing things" that were not meant to be seen as such. But then, in rereading Christopher Wilson's seminal study *The Gothic Cathedral*, I could see I was seeing something there to see.

Since antiquity the circle and sphere, by virtue of their having no beginning and no end, were associated with eternity and by extension with immortality and heaven; hence arches and vaults which are part-circular or part-spherical in shape and which rise high over our heads also function as symbols of heaven.

As symbols, arches and vaults were interchangeable with many other arched forms, which proliferated in Gothic architecture and art, for all of them signify heaven as an entity and as the sum of innumerable small heavens, the

dwelling places of the saved in the house of the Lord alluded to by Christ (John 14.2). In this sense the tracery of Reims, the panelled elevations of Gloucester, the arch mouldings of Lincoln, the vaults of Salamanca, the aedicular towers of Laon, the statue-populated niches of Wells, and even the clergy-sheltering choir stall of Albi are all as one.¹

The circles are everywhere and the power of this design in the great churches is this: each one represents the summoned presence of glory. The Gothic Cathedral was designed to be the New Jerusalem, the place in which God's glory would come to pass or be manifest. Each circle can be considered a world, an age, a place, a people, a time whoever is summoned, conjured to appear before the throne. It is as if the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets are all called to draw near and offer tribute and praise. This is unbounded, beyond measure, as vast as the universe. And yet, it is only half of the equation.

The other half is light. The light as it emerges through the stained glass, the light that falls from the clearstory above, and the light of the beauty of design, material, and grandeur. It may be hard at first to imagine stone as emitting light as it neither emits or allows physical light to pass through it as glass does or as something pourous or sheer material. The light emitting from the stone is not physical light, but spiritual light. The light of the first day.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.
—Genesis 1.1-5

In the first creation account the poet distinguishes between spiritual light, the light overcoming the darkness, from the physical light or great lights of the fourth day. In this first day light we have truth and beauty and goodness; we have spirits like love and joy and peace. These are the lights where we behold creation and the other not as objects but as our own being, our beloved. This is sublime light in both its goodness and its violence (darkness). On the first day there is both the beautiful and the grotesque.

Why the Gothic Cathedral, the great churches of the 12-14 centuries, why these massive constructions are important for us in our consideration is this: the great churches are the highest form, the greatest example of how and why one satisfies the debt of memory. They are without peer the great model of memory being restored. In them is the deepest memory, the first memory of life: the first act of creation, our greatest shared memory is this light being separated from the darkness.

¹ Christopher Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990; 8-9.

Hence, in every tomb, every statue, every shrine and plaza there an attempt to behold and conjure this light. Our construction, our eulogy or grave marker may have no circle or orb, no symbol of the eternal as it is so overwhelmingly present in the Gothic cathedral, but it is immortality we hope to embody, to call out, to restore in an act of penance. For the plaza in Duluth and the pavers spelling atonement there is an attempt to restore the memory of justice, to make amends for the misdeed and thus restore the glory of the earth, prepare the soul for the encircled judgment seat, the throne of the New Jerusalem. In the opposite offering, the call for honor we are casting this light, the light of the first day by saying in this one we saw what was good and true and beautiful. The memorial exists in the tension of these two: in this tragedy we lost the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Although it may sound strange for stone to be a source of light, the ribbed ceiling and the flying buttress and the circle upon circle of the windows ending in the junction of arches, in this stone light is cast upon. We can see what is eternal in our presence and in ourselves. Memory is illuminated by the beauty of the eternal symbol.

