
Reviewed by Steven Schloeder

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IF THIS BE ORDINARY...

THE GEOMETRY OF LOVE:

Space, time, mystery, and meaning in an ordinary church,

by Margaret Visser.

North Point Press (New York, New York),

336pp., \$27.00 cloth, 2000.

THE NEXT TIME you host a dinner party, be sure to include Margaret Visser on your guest list. Not only is she an expert on the culture of dining—*Since Eve Ate Apples Much Depends on Dinner* (1986) and *The Rituals of Dinner* (1991)—she is a delightful raconteur, a self-described “anthropologist of everyday life,” and, as this book reveals, a fine scholar on Christian art and architecture. *The Geometry of Love* is ostensibly an excursus through what the author calls (somewhat disingenuously), “an ordinary church,” which becomes an occasion for her to wax phenomenological on a vast array of stimulating and provocative topics ranging from etymology, hagiography, and campanology to the art of the mosaicist, the deep symbol structure encoded in Catholic church buildings, and the Greco-Roman roots of the cult of virgins in the early Christian Church.

Visser is interested in how we interact with things, in this case churches, and wants to get behind the mere facts and dates generally found in architectural guidebooks and pamphlets. I can certainly sympathize; my own library contains fifty or so guidebooks from churches around the world—a surprisingly uniform series of softbound, quarto-sized pamphlets from twenty to forty pages in full color with architectural plans, glossy photos, historiography, and artistic and architectural notes highlighting the “things to see.” For Visser, frustration with these books arises from the mere quantitative nature of the information provided, and their failure to tackle broader,

richer, and more engaging matters: *Why* such an artifact was there to begin with; *What* the building, or art object, was trying to say; *How* the people used or engaged it; *What* the historical and cultural background was that gave value to such objects. Visser therefore assumes the place of the consummate tour guide, and takes us with her on a fascinating and highly personal tour through the ancient Roman basilica of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura (St. Agnes outside the Walls), a fourth-century church founded by members of Constantine the Great's family, much modified over the centuries, yet still bespeaking its paleo-Christian foundation.

In our age of aniconic "liturgical skins" and whitewashed modernist barns, Visser gives the reader some wonderful insights into what a traditional church was about: "created within a cultural and religious tradition, it constitutes a collective memory of spiritual insights, of thousands of mystical moments. A church reminds us of what we have known." Today, our new churches are bereft of deep symbol structure and engaging artifacts, imagery, and architectural articulation. Instead, especially in the consumeristic West, we have been given the liturgy as entertainment and church as theater. The early Bauhaus architects and some of the less-principled leaders of the Liturgical Movement (especially after 1945), tried to craft the liturgy as a theatrical spectacle. To wit, a Liturgical Conference meeting in the 1960s was themed after e.e. cummings' "Damn everything but the circus," and culminated in a liturgy with the priest in a clown costume. Ironically, while reacting to the heavy theater and performance orientation of the Baroque High Mass, and all the while doing so under the banner of "active participation," the church designers and liturgists of the past fifty years have only cemented our lay backsides into the chairs (having discarded the family pew and the kneeler), and made us spectators at all-too-meager and banal presentations. At least the seventeenth century had Palestrina: now we only have tunes that even the archliberal Archbishop Rembert Weakland calls "trite in both musical form and text, more fit for the theater and the pub than for church."

Visser rightly takes exception to these developments, pointing out that, "A theatre is like a church—not the other way around. 'Church' or 'temple' is the main category, and 'theatre' a division of it." (Understanding such a drama, in its foundations, was part of the liturgical *cultus*.) Visser explains that, whereas "distance between watcher and watched is essential to theatrical experience... [p]eople come together in a church...not to view but to take part." The church is a "place of encounter between people and God," and the recent fascination with theatrical "in the round" seating can only frustrate this encounter. A church was, and still is, a place that should engage us in our imagination and collective memory, and, through our senses, draw us into a transcending experience of worship and communion with God.

Visser begins by recounting a personal memory of sitting in a small, isolated, hilltop church in Spain watching a Japanese tourist have a first encounter with a crucifix: “He stared aghast—as well he might—at a horrific, life-sized painted carving of a bleeding man nailed to two pieces of wood. When the guide had stopped talking, the man gestured wordlessly towards the statue. The guide nodded, smiled, and told him in which century it had been carved.” While the reader might be hard pressed to accept that a Japanese tourist sufficiently savvy and advantaged to travel on holiday to a remote part of Spain would never have seen a crucifix, this story is her point of departure for exploring the deeper questions surrounding the church building.

Many of Visser’s insights echo my own dissatisfaction with recent modern churches. For instance, her section on “columns” (conspicuously absent from most contemporary churches) as architectural devices ought to be read by every church designer and liturgist. The rows of nave columns bespeak our spiritual journey. They measure the road ahead for us. Architectonically, they satisfy our sense of the structural integrity of the building, and by extension, of the Church herself. The column in classical architecture was always anthropomorphic: Vitruvius lists the mythopoetic interpretations of the various orders, and the very forms of caryatids and atlantes—male and female columnar figures such as on the Erechtheion in Athens—are deeply embedded in the tripartite arrangement of the base (feet), the shaft (body), and the capital (head—*capital* being related to the Latin *caput*). Thus, when St. Paul calls James, Cephas, and John “pillars” (Galatians 2:9), he is speaking a well-known language of architectural and symbolic forms that predated Christianity and imbued the Mediterranean culture. Visser sees the column as “a living thing, taut with energy,” and explains that the *entasis*, or “swelling” on a properly designed column, creates a certain tension and movement that enlivens the nave. The loss of this “living” element in most recent churches and the “mechanical and lifeless” straight pipe columns such as on the façade of the new Saint Agnes in Manhattan strip the church of key elements that once gave scale, movement, grace, and interest in churches.

Generally, Visser’s descriptions of Sant’Agnese are vivid and engaging, and, although this is one of the few major Roman churches that I have yet to visit, her descriptions allowed me very much to visualize the building in my mind’s eye. But what of the less traveled layperson, who might not have an architect’s training or a professional interest in the topic? Despite Visser’s lucid and articulate writing style, it is a shame that this descriptive book about architecture was published without images. One needs to go to Visser’s website (at www.margarevisser.com) to see the photos and plans of the church and various items described and discussed in the book—and, even then, these images are rather amateurish and blurry snapshots.

As fine and thorough a scholar as she is, Visser is also not inerrant, especially in matters liturgical. In her section on the altar and liturgical orientation, she uncritically perpetuates the mistaken notion that, "During the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Roman Catholic Church decided to return to a very early custom, and have the priest say Mass facing the people." On two accounts this is incorrect: first, as Gamber points out in *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, "One would look in vain for a statement in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council that said that Holy Mass is to be celebrated facing the people." Secondly, Gamber and many other liturgists now conclude that the liturgical model employed in the early twentieth century, by Guardini and Parsch among others, of the priest on one side of the altar facing the people, is indeed "without a doubt an innovation and not a return to a practice of the early Church." Jungmann, in fact, calls the claim that the early Christian Church celebrated liturgy *versus populum*, "nothing but a fairy tale."

Visser's liturgical understanding, while certainly reflective of the widespread confusion since Vatican II, is unbecoming a scholar of the liturgy or liturgical architecture. It is particularly strange that a cultural anthropologist would repeat the notion that, in the traditional liturgical arrangement, the priest would stand "with his back to the congregation," when, in fact, it is more precise to describe the arrangement, with Cardinal Ratzinger, as "priest and people together facing the same way in a common act of Trinitarian worship." One would wish that she would apply her formidable talents and perspicacity toward understanding the cultural, psychological, and sociological shifts that have occurred with Mass celebrated *versus populum*. This arrangement is a widespread deviation from virtually all hieratic forms of worship across history and culture. Rather, Visser simply acquiesces in the banal commonplace that, "The symbolism stresses sharing and dialogue." How blithely she discards the ancient idea that worship is a human encounter with *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

Ironically, Visser's concern for proper liturgical orientation here arises from a bizarre anomaly at Sant'Agnese not found in any other Roman basilica. Visser makes much of the fact that an ancient statue of St. Agnes is on the apse side of the altar, requiring the priest to celebrate Mass "with his back to the people," while apparently oblivious of the fact that, in the Roman basilica model, liturgies are historically oriented across the nave toward the east. She comments earlier that Sant'Agnese is "oriented," but fails to make the connection that virtually all the ancient major Roman basilicas are likewise roughly aligned so that the apse is on the west end and the doors toward the east. In the ancient tradition of the Church, it was never a question of whether to celebrate mass toward or away from the people,

but always one of *ad orientem*. Tertullian, among many other fathers, writing around 200 A.D., describes Christians as “praying in the direction of the rising sun.” Constantine the Great, father of the patroness of Sant’Agnese, had Christian basilicas built with east facing doors in imitation of Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. The Roman basilicas are somewhat unusual in that the apses tend to be in the west and the doors toward the east; typically, early Christian churches have the sanctuary toward the east. However, regardless of the disposition of the church building, the Church celebrated the liturgy toward the east—even in churches with the altar on the west side. In certain ancient liturgies the deacon would command the assembly prior to the Eucharistic prayer, “Turn to the East,” or, “Turn to the Lord,” thus requesting that the assembled faithful face away from the altar and toward the front doors—such was the importance of the cosmic orientation of the Christian liturgy and our eschatological horizon!

So Visser is faced with a conundrum at Sant’Agnese, where Mass is said from the nave side of the altar, because an ancient statue of Agnes—a pre-Christian classical female figure refashioned in the seventeenth century into an image of the virgin martyr—occupies the apse side, where the priest normally would stand. It seems likely that this statue, which we know to have been remodeled in the Baroque age, was only placed there in that era, at the Counter Reformation, when concerns for liturgical orientation were quickly waning. Thus, what Visser inveighs against—the liturgical orientation toward the apse—was probably not the original liturgical orientation in the church, but a Baroque restructuring; and what she misses is that the statue ought to be moved, not so that Mass can be said *versus populum*, but rather to restore the church to its original form so that Mass can be celebrated *ad orientem*!

Likewise Visser claims that, in the revised liturgy, “the clear view of the ritual [by the faithful] . . . is demanded,” and that, “The Eucharist, in fact, does not require an altar, or even a table—any surface will do.” I cannot find any citation in the conciliar or curial documents demanding that the faithful be able to see the ritual gestures (although it is certainly our current Western experience). Visser explicitly contradicts canon law, which states that, “The eucharistic Sacrifice must be carried out on an altar that is dedicated or blessed. Outside a sacred place an appropriate table may be used, but always with an altar cloth and a corporal.” (932.2) The corporal (from the Latin *corpus*) represents Christ’s body, and becomes a sort of moveable temporary altar, thus respecting the tradition that “the altar is Christ.” The corporal maintains the symbolism, albeit somewhat vestigially for the sake of exigency, but the use of “any surface” is nowhere permitted. Again, for a cultural anthropologist, Visser seems curiously unconcerned with the elements of the deep symbol structure that make for authentic liturgical ritual.

The most provocative chapter in this book proves to be the final one, in which Visser examines the tomb of St. Agnes, along with the whole cult of

virgin-martyrs that developed in the early days of the Church. Visser makes a number of solid, if not entirely persuasive, arguments: that female martyrs ought be respected most for their sacrificial witness to Christ and not the status of their preserved virginity; that women have long been held bound by the culture of shame specifically applied to their sexual status; that the miraculous theme of their virginity preserved “intact” seems to contradict known Roman practices both of raping virgins prior to execution and of exposing them in the brothels in punishment; and that sexual violation prior to execution would indeed be a “double martyrdom.” However, she seems hasty in concluding, as a consequence, that the miraculous tales of how God preserved their physical virginity were both a holdover from the Greco-Roman ideal of the religious virgin, and must have been added to satisfy the expectations of the listening audience. Nor is it obvious that such a valorization of physical virginity ought to be deplorable to modern Christians. In fact, it seems that Visser falls into the same predicament as her anecdotal Spanish tour guide did: When faced with the inexplicable, she resorts to mere facts rather than her intended goal of entering into the reality represented by the artifact (in this case, the martyr’s story).

The idea of martyr as “witness” refers not just to their “witnessing” the Gospel to their persecutors, but that the miraculous events surrounding their often horrid deaths, such as the common theme of the martyrs being oblivious to the pains of the torture, gives “witness” to their sanctity—that they could endure the pains of the flesh because their soul was united with God. Irenaeus describes St. Blandina as being “rapt in communion with Christ” as the wild bull gored her entrails. If one holds that God does indeed work miracles, that these virgins were betrothed to Jesus their Lord, and that their divine Groom would be “jealous” of their gift to him, it does not seem so far fetched that divine providence might intervene in these few known cases to preserve their bodily integrity. Devotional cults usually sprang up in the communities where the saint lived and died, and fabrications which contradicted known facts to develop would require whole local populations, even those who witnessed the events, to suspend disbelief.

In making her case for the pagan values in the stories of the virgin martyrs, Visser also ignores other circumstances which might lead to different, or more complex, insights into the subject. Consider, for instance, the *cultus* of Perpetua and Felicity, two married mother martyrs, which was so popular in the fourth and fifth centuries that Augustine forbade the reading of their *Acts* as liturgical texts, and the example of other matronly martyrs such as Felicity of Rome, Julitta of Iconium, Julitta of Caesarea, and Symphorosa. Similarly, Visser suggests that, since these upper-class, professed virgins elected to remove themselves from the socio-sexual economy of the day, Christian-professed virginity struck at the heart of Roman society, the family. She fails to mention that the vestals were taken from the same patrician class, which

points to other possible conclusions. Nor does the lack of accounts of rape of early Christian women (and men) necessarily imply that there was a popular continuation of pagan themes of temple virgins—the “ancient and archetypical heroic plot”—that Christianity was remiss in failing to dispel. St. Paul wisely admonishes, “Let it not be mentioned among you” (Ephesians 5:12).

Throughout this section, Visser seems unduly touchy regarding the early Church’s valorization of the virgin martyr. Were there a widespread ongoing devotional *cultus* toward the virgin martyrs today, or a movement that promoted the idea of “bodily integrity” as intrinsic to female sanctity, Visser’s incessant critique of the hagiographical tradition might be warranted. At least in the twenty-first-century West, the specter of Jansenism—which associated sexuality with pollution—has passed, though I would suspect that anyone with a strong memory of pre-Vatican II Catholicism might yet be fighting old ghosts.

Despite such shortcomings, Visser has given us, in this book, a fascinating account of a church that is anything but “ordinary.” Her rich interweaving of hagiography, architecture, cultural anthropology, and frequent diversions into so many areas of science and art make this an enjoyable and provocative text for the interested layperson and specialist alike.

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