

While many of our modern churches are completed in a year or two, if you look at the great cathedrals of the world, many have taken centuries to complete.

One that is nearing completion is the Cathedral of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Spain. It is the most renowned building designed by Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi, and in many ways it reflects his faith.

Gaudi was born into a family of five in southern France to a boilermaker, Francesc and his wife Antonia, the youngest of five children. As a teenager, he began to see that he had an artistic talent, and later in life he studied architecture, and when he graduated after studying that along with many other subjects as an apparently average student, the director of the Barcelona Architecture School told him “we have given this academic title either to a fool or a genius. Time will show.” Gaudi himself wasn’t sure where he was being called in life, even joking to a friend “they are saying I’m an architect now.”

Among his first projects were a worker’s building, some newsstands and eventually he would design a palace and a church crypt. But in 1883, he was

put in charge of something that would consume him for the rest of his life. This was to build a Barcelona Cathedral called “Sagrada Familia,” or the Basilica of the Holy Family. This was a commission he took very seriously, because it was going to be a cathedral that, even in 1883, was the kind of place that just was no longer built.

Gaudi dove into his work, and wanted it to be designed with soaring towers, spires, and a dense symbolism. It was to be a “20th century cathedral.” And so he designed it with facades representing the Nativity, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ; with 18 towers, symbolizing the 12 Apostles, the four Evangelists, the Virgin Mary and Christ. The Christ tower is the tallest, and it will be 500 feet high when it is finished. When completed in 2026, it will stand as the tallest church building in the world.

With the project consuming his life, you can imagine some wanted to speed it along. His response was typically “my client can wait” to those who wanted him to move things along more quickly. His ultimate client was God, and it was said that Gaudi wanted to have the church be the finest and most perfect sacred temple for his client. He was working for the greater glory of God. He would direct the construction of the church from 1883

until he died in 1926, becoming so involved with the church that he set up residence in his onsite study and devoted the last 14 years of life to this project alone.

Small wonder he got the name “God’s architect.” But perhaps over his life, he had been designing an equally beautiful building, that of his soul, by deepening his faith in God. Early in life, it was said he had different indulgent tastes; but later he focused on God. In building the church, he wanted to take his time to do it right. He would go to Mass daily, and also spend time in prayer adoring our Lord in the Eucharist. One of his friends remarked how he was “a constant model of virtue, of total sacrifice, with the shining lights which, to our eyes, seem to surround him with holiness. He was a man with a living faith; his hope in God had no limits...and at the same time he was all heart - in other words, a burning ember of charity.” He also remarked that Gaudi lived a life of austerity towards himself which, as people looked at him, they no longer saw a career man, but rather a man who was devoted to building something not for his own glory, but for God’s.

When he died, the people of Barcelona popularly proclaimed him a saint, and the director of the Museum of the Barcelona Archdiocese wrote an

article calling him “God’s architect.” But probably more important than that title to Gaudi are what has happened at the basilica because of the cathedral. There have been documented conversions resulting from it’s architecture. Kenji Imai arrived in Barcelona after his death, and he was traveling all over the world to meet the great architects of the world. When he found Gaudi had passed on, the church made such an impression on him later in life he would become a Catholic. Another convert was a sculptor, who was featured in a story on the basilica on 60 minutes a few years back, which you can still find online.

Indeed, in seeing pictures of the basilica and hoping to visit it one day, it’s clear that it has touched so many because quite literally, it points the way to God by showing us not a God who has disappeared into the heavens, but rather a God who is still present in our world. A God whom Gaudi wanted to serve by creating a place where people could be pointed to this loving God whom he served. For all the praise that he has received, Gaudi did not want to be remembered for his own glory, but indeed wanted to glorify God and help others to do the same.

The Sagrada Familia basilica in one sense points the way to God in how the art and architecture touch the soul, to the point where people have been converted in part through seeing it's beauty. But the basilica is also a reminder of how our God is alive, and in the here and now, giving us His love, and of how we are called to respond to that.

When you think of the ascension, you may think of Jesus arising on the clouds to heaven. But we don't mean that Jesus has undertaken a journey within space and time, like Superman coming to earth from Krypton.

Rather Jesus goes out of space and time to be into a higher dimension, that of God's own life. It is also in heaven where Jesus will direct the things of earth from his place in heaven, a bit like a general would direct the battle from atop a hill. It is here, in heaven but also still with us on earth, that He is not just present in Palestine, but to all of creation. That's why we can't think of Jesus as somehow gone. Rather he is reigning in heaven to continue the work of building up the Kingdom here on earth. Jesus is in a different metaphysical dimension if you will. In his ascension, we also have the hope of undergoing this transformation where we will be with our Lord in heaven. But to do that means serving the ultimate king. Because to follow Him there, we need to be perfected. Jesus is drawing us into His world in

heaven. To use the analogy of Gaudi as God's architect, taking his whole life to build only part of the cathedral, how do we do this with the care that we show to our souls as we try to perfect them? The keys are remembering on earth, the goal isn't escape, but about bettering ourselves and the world as we strive to become saints, which takes a lot of careful work.

For one, we remember God is not gone. He is here too, helping us to do this work. On our part, like Gaudi, we have to seek God. Some think due to all the bad things in the world, it is a sign that God has left the world on it's own. Others though never take the time to seek God as Gaudi did, because they get wrapped up in the concerns of their daily lives, or seek their own glory here on earth. And even among faithful Catholics, we can have sometimes a separation of heaven and earth mentality. We may want to get "up there" where we can be happy, never suffer, or on our bad days think of earth as some kind of jail. Think about how words get thrown around that lament the state of affairs in the world as awful; and fail to see the good in the world. That's not Christian thinking though. In the Sagrada Familia, in a beautiful way in architecture and art, you have heaven and earth in a sense coming together. The same thing happens at Mass. Just think even about our prayer "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Not "Lord,

please deliver me from this world.” Our world is beautiful; the challenge for the Christian is, like Gaudi, to be a person of hope who then transforms the world. We might not all be architects of buildings, but we can be architects of souls - of our own and of one another - when we have the right focus.

Mass in particular is where we ponder the sacrifice of Jesus for us; where our souls are lifted up as we reflect on our sins and are reminded of God’s mercy; as we think about the words of Scripture, and gaze upon Jesus sacramentally in our midst giving us His Body as food for the journey. Mass is not a concert or a jamboree; it’s a link to heaven. And when we add to it things like personal prayer each day, or celebrating confession several times a year, we can fine tune if you will the various parts of our soul as we try to build a spiritual house that glorifies God. The Church, and the Sacraments, are really powerful reminders that Jesus is still here with us, walking with us step by step. Our second reading tells us “May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call...” That happens through prayer and reception of the sacraments, and by daily trying to become a better person.

With that, we learn how to be a witness by staying with the Church. The Church is there to give us the sacraments, but also to help grow our faith as

we trust in the Church. Remember as we come to Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, that Jesus created one Church, not many. The Church does not err in faith and morals, and will often challenge us. The Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church; so hopefully we also turn to the Church. There are great resources out there that help us to understand the faith, such as Bishop Robert Barron's "Word On Fire," or Fr. Mike Schmitz's videos on the Bible and Catechism, or "Formed," which are various apologetics videos. Often the Church will be counter cultural, but remember the Church is there to help us get to heaven, and helps us reach our potential. Jesus knew what He was doing when He created the Church, so may we trust in Her teachings.

As we do that, we do what the apostles do - we are sent. Our Gospel tells us that the apostles are told to make disciples of all nations, and the last words of Jesus to the Apostles are to be Jesus "witnesses in Jerusalem throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Last Thursday, 57 young men and women from our parish celebrated confirmation, and Bishop John LeVoir, retired Bishop of New Ulm who presided, reminded the confirmandi that they are sent into the world to change it for the better, because the world is in bad shape. The world tells us do what you want. The



world says keep your mouth shut when you are counter-cultural, and get with the times. But the Christian knows where we are going, and that to get there means saying yes to some things, no to others, and the Christian wants to help people find the way to heaven. Philip goes to Samaria, and Paul goes to the ends of the known world at his time and suffers greatly for the faith, as do the others. Gaudi, through his work and how he lead his life, as a witness who helped the faith grow in others. You and I need to be the bridge between heaven and earth through how we treat people, and how we practice works of love and mercy, and how we inspire others to live a life of faith through our words and actions. We cannot fear speaking about what our faith teaches if we really will the good of the other and want them to go to heaven.

It was said that Gaudi's physical appearance changed over life in that while young, he dressed in costly suits, and made it a point to look good to others, and often spent time in the theater and opera house, and visited projects in an elegant horse carriage. The message seemed to be that he was to be seen as someone respected an important. But later in life, he ate frugally, dressed in old warn out suits, and neglected his appearance to the point he was mistaken for a beggar - such as when he was struck by the streetcar and

taken the hospital and no one at first recognized him. Gaudi though through how he lived his life created something beautiful within and to the world he left a bridge between heaven and earth in the beautiful basilica he began. He did it for God, not for himself. As humans like the young Gaudi, we too can spend so much time on the things that eventually pass away, and get caught up in ego, ambition, and self-glory. Sometimes we even do things we think are charitable, but really are just to be seen or noticed or for ourselves. When you look though at the saints, canonized and those not canonized, the people who touched our lives, you see people of hope who changed this world for the better through thousands of simple actions of love. We might not look to the sky, but sometimes we can look to the mirror in the sense we focus so much on ourselves and our own little worlds that we forget that we should be focused on heaven by beautifying our souls and helping others to do the same. On this feast of the Ascension, may we strive to do that by using the grace God has given us to make this world a beautiful place. By remembering that our goal is not to wait around and hope to make it to heaven, but rather living for heaven by helping people to see the presence of Jesus in their lives by making Him known through our actions. So let us go and truly make a difference, building up our souls and being beacons of hope in the world that illuminate the road to heaven.