God Is Alive - Books In Stone

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God Is Alive!

Each year, millions of people travel to mediterranean countries for their unique beauty and rich history and architecture. Many visit the numerous churches, basilicas, monasteries, and mosques and I had the privilege to be one of those visitors. I was struck by the massiveness of the churches, the beauty in the mosaics, windows and other decorations, and the reverence that most of the visitors displayed in these historic places. Since these highly ornate places of worship are not part of my church experience, I was curious about the history behind them and how one experiences God in these various buildings. Here is what I discovered:

Churches in the Mediterranean are highly ornate to serve as "books in stone," capturing the history and stories of the past. Historically, this style is rooted in Byzantine wealth, which allowed for lavish ornamentation, and the theological goal of creating a "heaven on earth" designed for sensory worship. Ornamentation is considered a method of glorifying God and uplifting the human soul, following the tradition of building an elaborate temple.

The use of stained-glass windows was primarily to educate, inspire, and create a sacred atmosphere by transforming natural light into a visual, spiritual experience. Historically, these windows, as well as mosaics and other art forms, served as a "visual Bible" to teach religious stories to illiterate congregations. Stained glass lets in natural light; light represents purity, the heavens, spirituality, and genesis. These windows are not merely decorations; they are considered a form of "light theology" that turns a building into a sanctuary.

The famous Catalan architect, Antoni Gaudi, who helped to create the Basilica de la Sagrada Família in Barcelona said, "Architecture is the arrangement of light...Glory is light, light brings joy, and joy is the joy of the spirit." A deeply religious architect who believed his work was a collaboration with the Creator, Gaudi famously stated, "The straight line belongs to Men, the curved one to God". His work, particularly the Sagrada Família, was driven by nature and spirituality, aiming to return to the origins of design.

Gaudi intended that church to be a "cathedral for the poor". He wanted the church to dignify the industrial workers of Barcelona and serve as a place of refuge for them, ultimately dedicating the final years of his life to this vision without receiving any payment for it. Our tour guide said that Gaudi asked the Pope for permission to build the cathedral and the Pope answered, "As long as you can pay for it." Some say that's why it has taken so long to complete; the great thing is that all the tourists who visit are helping to fund that completion. My experience while sitting in the Sagrada Familia was definitely one of connecting with God through light and beauty.

God spoke to me through music as well whether it was hearing the performance of "The Prayer" on the cruise ship entertainment or attending an evening concert of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" enthusiastically performed by Interpreti Veneziani, a baroque string ensemble, in a beautiful former church in Vivaldi's hometown of Venice. For inspiration, listen to Céline Dion & Andrea Bocelli sing "The Prayer":
www,youtube,com/watch?v=W8DGuvab_Lc
and the Interpreti Veneziani perform Vivaldi's "Four Seasons."
www,youtube,com/watch?v=INPf9XUlCwU

Another highlight for me was experiencing God through many of the people that

we met on this adventure. One of our guides was originally from Peru. Coming to Barcelona for college, he fell in love with the culture and history and discovered his passion for sharing it with others as a tour guide. It turns out that his mother was going to a university in California and he attended high school for a couple of years in Castro Valley, CA, a town near where I live. He truly made the history of Montserrat Monastery, near Barcelona, come alive as he told us of the monks hiding themselves and significant statues including the Black Madonna--Virgin of Montserrat in the nearby caves during numerous invasions and wars. It is still Catalonia's most important religious retreat and groups of young people from Barcelona and all over Catalonia often make overnight hikes to watch the sunrise from the heights of Montserrat.

Food for thought: Whether I acknowledge the presence of the divine as God, Heavenly Parent, my Higher Power, or another name, do I take time to notice the light and truth quietly animating the world around me, and when I do, how do I respond? We do not have to travel to distant locations to experience God if we are intentional in looking at nature, people, places, and even challenges through the 'Divine Lens.'

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