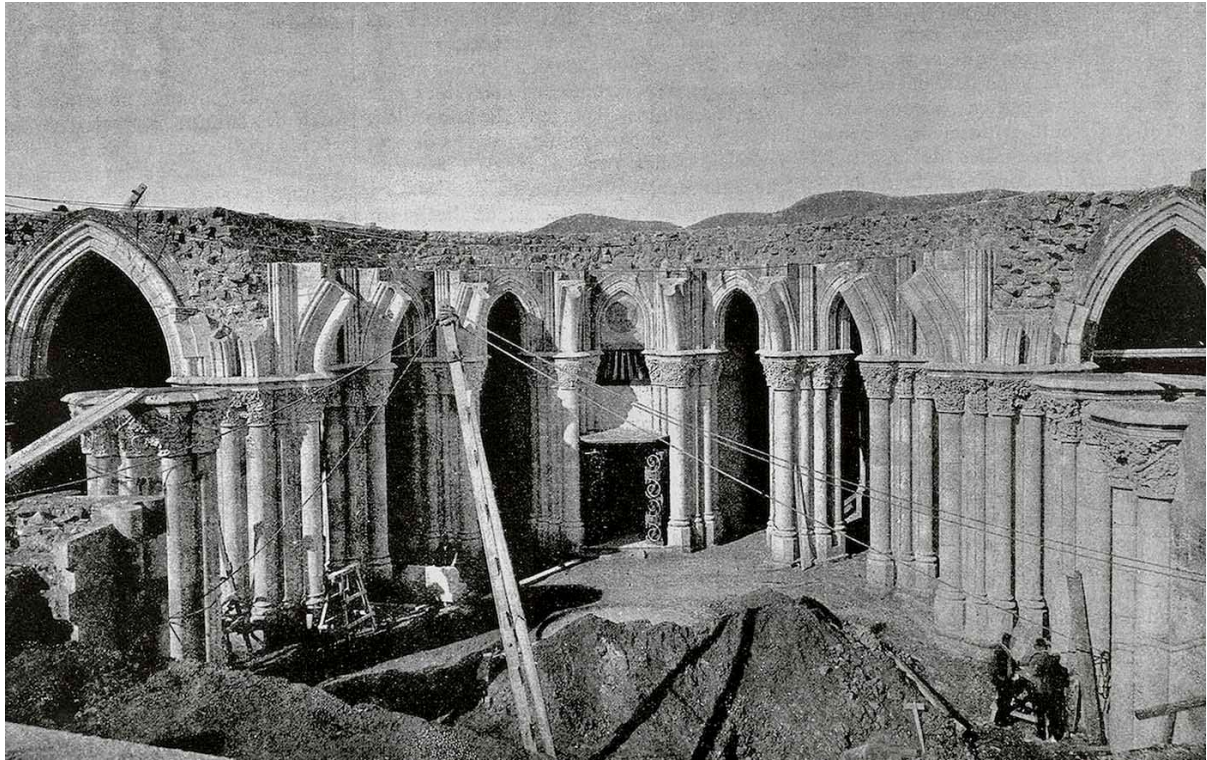


Title: Sagrada Familia, Gaudí and the Christian Spirituality

Thesis: Gaudí's design language of Sagrada Familia enriched Christian spirituality during its early construction (1883-1926)



(Figure 1. The Sagrada Familia in 1887)

Abstract

This thesis explored the proposition that Antoni Gaudí's design of the Sagrada Família enriched Christian spirituality during its formative construction period. While a multitude of architectural scholars acknowledged the unique design language and technical marvel of the cathedral. A critical gap is present in understanding how its design engendered and impacted spiritual experiences, religious practices, and communal dynamics. The purpose of the essay is to elucidate the principles through which the Sagrada Família acted as a catalyst for spiritual growth and transformation within a burgeoning secular society.

Christian Spirituality is conceptualised as 4 constructs: (1) belief systems, (2) practices, (3) experiential elements, and (4) community dynamics. Each of these domains is assessed in accordance to the construction, design themes, symbolism and the architectural language. A combination of academic scholarship of Christian spirituality and architectural history is integrated into this paper. Archival materials of photographs, drawings and media records offered insightful opinions into historical events and opinions regarding the Sagrada Familia. These sources depicted overlooked elements such as ornaments, details, etc, bringing a nuanced perspective to the underrepresented history.

The methodology started with the statement that Gaudí's design reinforces the core aspect of the Christian belief, including the doctrine of the Trinity. Study on the Nativity and Passion facades, arrangement of towers, thus other symbolic elements that circle around the concept of the Trinity.

Apart from the doctrine, the Sagrada Familia also promoted religious practice. The expansion of scale in different parts of the cathedral increases the capacity of the services. The addition of the crypt introduced a modest design for all worshippers. The combination of these factors enhanced and elevated the experience of spirituality.

Experiential qualities were achieved through evoking fear and awe. The physical dimensions, usage of light and nature-inspired design instilled a sense of reverence and mystery to its visitors.

Lastly, the connection of the cathedral with the surrounding communities is elevated through fellowships and traditions. In many ways the Sagrada Familia was accessible to all social classes and facilitated people of diverse backgrounds to worship. In all, the architecture was an embodiment of Faith and the gospel.

Introduction

"The greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity." John Ruskin (1849, The Seven Lamps of Architecture)

For a remarkable 144 year has the Sagrada Familia has been under construction. By which building technologies have evolved at an unprecedented pace and incorporated into Gaudí's cathedral. A cathedral radiates a dire sense of heaviness with its atmosphere, reflecting God's attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence¹ in designing the architecture of worship, from inner sacred spaces to colossal towers, constructing the 'Holy' place and creating the sensation of serenity in the hearts of visitors. It is known that the Sagrada Familia adopts organic forms, innovative structures, and elaborate facades. Symbolic ornamentation are plastered across the cathedral, and the interior evokes the impression of a forest as the structural columns branch into hyperboloid vaults of extensive scale. Together with tall and dynamic colour-stained-glass windows, light was brought in as one of the main characters. The interplay of form, symbols and light in this Gothic Revival approach transcends traditional architectural boundaries. As Josep Maria Subirachs mentioned, "Gaudí left us not just a church but a universe of symbols and forms."

Despite the numerous well-documented studies on the cathedral, the knowledge gap lies between the connection of the intricately designed cathedral and the way it contributes to spirituality, its chief functionality. In other words, there is a scarcity of in-depth studies focusing on how the cathedral arouses worshippers' spiritual responses. In addition, the influence of the basilica on religious practices and interpretations within the changing social and cultural context. It would be compelling to investigate how the combination of the above factors contributes and connects with spirituality, precisely, Christianity. Moreover, as a Christian myself, it would be an exceptional opportunity to delve into how architecture, a physical tool, could potentially contribute to the intangible realm. Thus, such design motifs could, in the future, be notable tools that architects would be able to incorporate to elevate the worshipping experience.

The difficulty in quantifying and qualifying the impact of the Sagrada Familia on Christian spirituality is due to the deeply personal, subjective and "ineffable"² characteristics of spirituality. It is a synthesis of individual belief, sentiment and unique cultural background that could not be captured in a simple manner. Alternatively, throughout the span of Sagrada Familia's early stage of construction, unlike other medieval cathedrals, systematic records of pilgrim accounts and visitors' spiritual reactions were scarce. In addition, spirituality is deemed to be a slow, nonlinear process of being submerged in sacred environments³. Unlike science, for instance, momentum physics, which increases each time a directional force is added to it; the nonlinear quality of spirituality tends to be swayed by mysterious forces that are constantly acting on an individual. Despite the complication in relating the impact of architecture to spirituality, through the analysis of various core aspects of the Christian spirituality, belief system, practices, experiential elements, and community dynamics, are effective indicators of levels of Christian spirituality⁴.

The structure of the thesis is divided into 4 major parts that explain the definition and each core aspect of Christian spirituality. Different parts of the construction, design motifs, symbolism and architectural

¹ English Standard Version Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001)

² William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, ed. Martin Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

³ Robert Wuthnow, After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

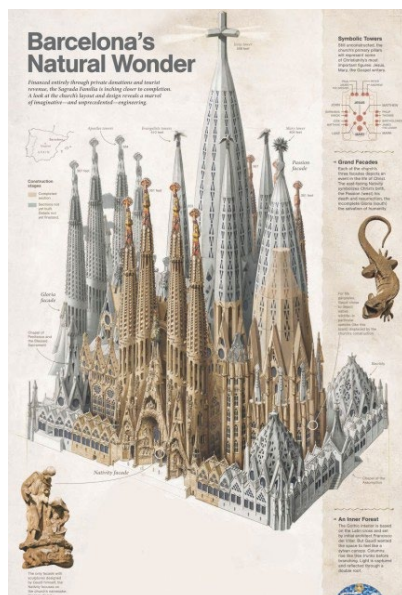
⁴ S.P. Pretorius, "Understanding Spiritual Experience in Christian Spirituality," Acta Theologica Supplementum 11 (2008): 159–76, <https://scielo.org.za/pdf/at/v28s11/08.pdf>.

language of the Sagrada Familia are categorised into corresponding aspects and subtopics within. Books and articles about the Sagrada Familia and Christian spirituality are studied to find the connection. Media from the past reflected the critique of various parties on the Sagrada Familia, notably in the late 19th to early 20th century, the period when designs became clear to the public's eye⁵. As a primary source of study, photographs and drawings are used, which brings emphasis on ornaments and details that have frequently been neglected or underrepresented in prior studies.

The objective of this thesis is to investigate how the Sagrada Familia, throughout the span of the early construction, brought about spiritual influence, whether constructive or not, to society.

Belief System

To commence with, the triune God, the bedrock of the Christian theology, acknowledges the Trinity nature of God – the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit⁶. This belief is stated in chapters of the bible, such as 2 Corinthians 13:14 and Matthew 28:19. The Number of three played a significant role in Sagrada Familia's design. The number of feature façades, Nativity, Passion and Glory, which depict the life of Christ, the crucifixion and eternal glory, respectively. Besides, a total of 12 towers that represented the Apostles were divided, with 3 towers placed on each façade. Other references include ornamentation and sculptural elements such as the Alpha and Omega carved on the cathedral doors, the Lamb of God (the Christ) placed in multiple areas like the altar and Doves (the Spirit) of different colours constructed on the colour-stained glass windows, as George Ferguson deemed it as a “catechism in stone”⁷. As seen, the cathedral heavily reinforced the unity and importance of the Trinity in its design motif. These motives, translated in Gaudí's design language, were showcased not only in the interior space where Christian practices were held, but extended to its sophisticated exterior, clearly visible to its neighbourhood, thus spreading the influence of the spiritual ideal among surrounding residents.



(Figure 2. Façade and Towers of the Sagrada Familia)

⁵ Sagrada Familia, "History of the Temple," accessed April 14, 2025, https://sagradafamilia.org/en/history-of-the-temple?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁷ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 12.

Secondly, achieving salvation through Christ through his atoning death and subsequent resurrection. The event of Christ's death on the cross to justify the sinner, also known as 'substitutionary atonement', is virtually the heart of the gospel⁸. As Martin Luther mentioned, it is the Faith that saves the sinner, not one's works⁹. The question lies in how the cathedral was able to invoke such spiritual influence through physical means. Parables, metaphors and symbolic languages were widely used in the scripture to illustrate abstract concepts. These methods convert abstract ideas into more tangible ones, engage the readers' imagination and memory¹⁰ and arouse self-reflection in the audience. The design of the Passion Façade commenced in 1911, devoted to the suffering and crucifixion of Christ and illustrating the sacrifice of Christ for the world to bring redemption to the people on Earth.



(Figure 3. The Passion Façade)

The façade exhibited a sense of heaviness and violence. Slanted skeletal columns of six rose from the ground, creating a pyramidal pediment, and on top were bone-shaped pillars. Uniquely, columns are left bare, tapered in angular forms, resembling the starkness of bones and stretching of muscles. Within the pocketed space under the pediment consisted of three layers of sculpture crafted by the hands of Joan Subirachs. Together they depict the story of betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus, which was designed by Gaudí. Commencing from the lowest level were stories of the Last Supper where Christ revealed the betrayal from one of his disciples, the Kiss of Judas of which the betrayal took place, and 'Ecco Homo', where Christ is then handed over to the judgement by the government and the public¹¹. The middle level portrayed the grieving over Christ of The Three Marys, the figure of Saint Veronica and Longinus the soldier. Lastly, the top level showed Roman soldiers throwing dice for Jesus' robe on the left, in the middle was the main theme of the façade, Christ being crucified. The base of the cross was a skull, which symbolised death and Golgotha¹². A piece of bronze structure hung above the cross representing the veil that was torn at the death of Christ¹³. Lastly, the Burial scene on the right depicted Christ's body wrapped and placed in a tomb. The composition of the Passion façade is designed in chronological order of events unfolding from the lower level to the higher level, also referencing the resurrection of Christ from death and ascension to heaven.

⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

⁹ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520).

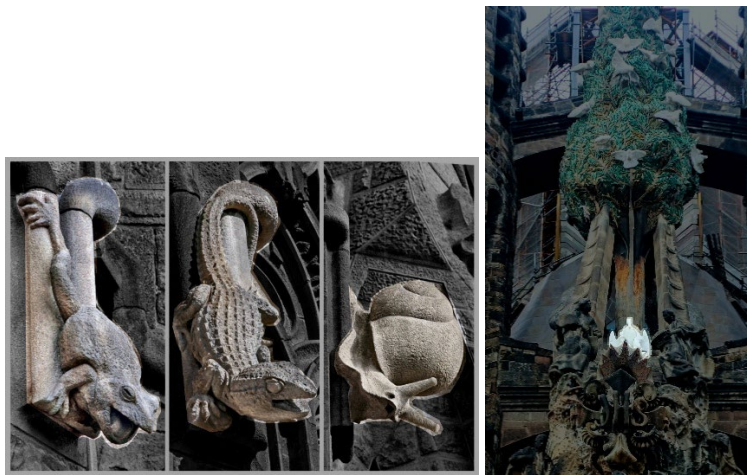
¹⁰ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

¹¹ Buffalo Architecture and History, "Passion Façade - Sagrada Família," accessed April 14, 2025, <https://buffaloah.com>.

¹² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Golgotha," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Golgotha>.

¹³ Admin, "The Façade of the Passion: History and Symbolism of the Most Terrifying Façade of the Sagrada Família," Barbany Artesans, August 11, 2021, <https://granitsbarbany.com/en/the-facade-of-the-passion-history-and-symbolism-of-the-most-terrifying-facade-of-the-sagrada-familia/>.

The Nativity Façade, on the opposite side of the apse, exhibited a drastically disparate theme. Three porticos from left to right representing 'Hope', 'Charity' and 'Faith' respectively. The layout of subjects in the order illustrates the events of Jesus' birth¹⁴. Across the façade were animals like turtles, bees, flowers of Christmas and the Nile. A notable detail in the placement of the animals were that gargoyle sculptures, also known as grotesques, were used as tools to drain water off the façade of the cathedral. It was interpreted as an act of evil, symbolised by the animals deemed to be inferior¹⁵, e.g. reptiles, fleeing from the power of Christ, represented by the towers and pinnacles. Extending upwards were decorations of shell motifs, seemingly shells of Aquarius extending to the towers of the church. At the top stood a giant cypress tree, symbolising death and resurrection. The central position on the façade radiates the incorruptible character of Christ, when he was tested in the wilderness three times by the devil¹⁶. In a contrasting manner to the lower segment of the Nativity façade, animals symbolising birth and peace¹⁷, 21 doves were 'flying' from the nests on the tree. And on top sat a Christmas star that resembled the form of a Greek cross. Underneath the tree sat a pelican seemingly feeding her two children on top of coloured eggs. The pelicans, also referenced in the Bible, according to medieval literature, fed their babies with their blood¹⁸, painted the vivid metaphor of the Eucharist, symbolising Christ's sacrificial love. Other sculptures encapsulate stories from the bible such as Adoration of the Magi, Annunciation, and The Flight into Egypt.



(Figure 4.5. Reptiles on the Nativity Façade) (Figure. Pelican and her children)

The cathedral's image was highly dependent on the two elevations with contrasting natures: the Nativity façade, the glory of Heaven; the Passion façade, the inferno of Hell. No cathedral at the time in Spain reflected the same level of radical design and profound theological symbolism. In addition, exerted biblical authority, which incorporates Scripture, God's word, to govern the moral and spiritual life. The gospel is the original manuscript¹⁹ that is used for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. It is evident that the intention of enforcing the belief system of Christian spirituality is

¹⁴ Gijs Van Hensbergen, *The Sagrada Família: Gaudí's Heaven on Earth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

¹⁵ William Hixson, "The Symbolism of Serpents in Greco-Roman and Biblical Mythology," *Drover Review* (2021).

¹⁶ Holy Bible: New International Version (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc., 2011), Matt. 4:1–11.

¹⁷ Holy Bible: New International Version (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc., 2011), Gen. 6:1–9.

¹⁸ Rokas Oželis, "Pelican: A Christian Symbol Depicting the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ," *Bogoslovni Vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2023): 391–401, <https://www.teof.uni-lj.si/uploads/File/BV/BV2023/02/Ozelis.pdf>.

¹⁹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1881).

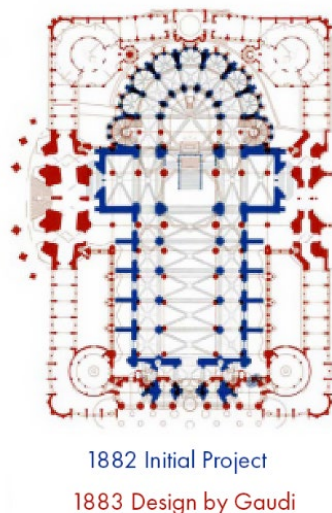
rooted deep in the design of the skin; whether the audience was able to fully apprehend it also depends on a multitude of factors, which the following addresses.

Practices

Practices reinforce the theory and belief in Christian Spirituality. A cathedral's vital role is to provide a suitable environment, not only holding events of such, but ideally enhancing the experience of practices. Prayer and worship is the foundation of sustaining the relationship with the 'Almighty'. Scripture such as John 4, 1 Thessalonians 5 mentions the importance of constant communication and dependence. Translating into the lens of the architecture: How did the Sagrada Familia help catalyse the believer's theory into practice?

Gaudí's design of the Sagrada Familia enhanced the prayer and worship experience in different ways. While the cathedral was first conceived as an expiatory church by a private endeavour of a publisher and philanthropist, Josep Maria Bocabella, who wanted to honour the Holy Family²⁰. Francisco de Paula del Villar y Lozano (1828-1901) designed in a neo-Gothic style involving a Latin cross floor plan, ogival windows, pointed bell towers²¹ and other elements. At the time, the cathedral was an expression of Catalan separatism or of an authoritarian Catholicism. A year after the commencement, Gaudí took over the project from del Villar as issues of cost arose. Gaudí transferred his own style into the cathedral, an assimilation of neo-Gothic style with his forms of Art Nouveau. He envisioned the temple with five naves, whereas the initial design from del Villar consists of three.

The addition of two side aisles broadened the width of the worship space, together with the elevated height of the nave, walls, vaults, and clerestory enhanced the worshipper's experience employing spatial design. Gaudí's design decision to expand accounted for the significant increase in capacity, specifically, the number of audience members for each service. In terms of scale and spatial requirement, these decisions had a constructive impact on the service experience.



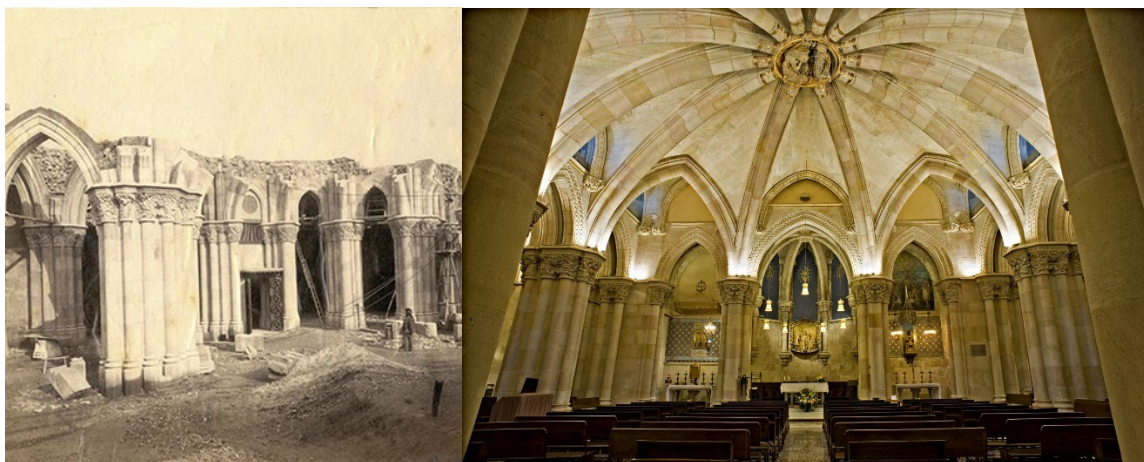
(Figure 6. Comparison of Initial design by del Villar versus Gaudí's design)

²⁰ Michael Burry and Antoni Gaudí, Expiatory Church of the Sagrada Família: Antoni Gaudí (London: Phaidon, 1993).

²¹ Sagrada Família, "Architecture of the Sagrada Família," accessed October 30, 2023, https://sagradafamilia.org/documents/20142/1000561/Booklet_04.pdf/5eb8514a-7bd2-77d0-15dc-9c9c0315cf23.

The experience of worship and prayer is followed by the service for the community, which is an essential field of practice within Christian spirituality. Modelled after Christ, acts of charity, justice and compassion towards society, especially the needy, are the core mission. The crypt of the Sagrada Família brought this vision to life. After Gaudí took over the project from del Villar, he altered the Gothic formulas, replacing the original stairs with spiral staircases and creating two sacristies attributed to the religious events in the crypt. While the crypt exhibits a more modest Gothic style compared to the intricately sculpted basilica, a notable element of symbolism was embedded in the central vault that contained the relief of the Annunciation. Recorded in the Gospel of Luke, where Archangel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will conceive and become the mother of Jesus Christ²². The sub-terrain crypt did not boast the same opulent beauty as the upper part of the basilica, yet the space is unique in its position. It resembled the setting where Christ was born – a modest manger, inconspicuous to the public, but found by shepherds who were guided to seek the good news that the ‘saviour’ was born. Similarly, Gaudí’s intent was to create a sober setting of worship for faithful worshippers and construction workers of the basilica. “*Diario de Barcelona*”, a newspaper in the 19th Century, mentioned (translated from Spanish) the first use of the crypt:

“Young congregants of San Luis Gonzaga gave rise to well-founded hopes who see their efforts fulfilled every day with the increase in children who gather every Sunday in the expiatory temple of the Holy Family” (Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, 1886)



(Figure 7. Crypt in construction of Sagrada Família) (Figure 8. Crypt interior)

Uncoincidentally, the cathedral brought accessibility of worship for people of all classes while it sat on the land that previously housed the impoverished working classes²³. Which lived up to Gaudí’s vision of the Sagrada Família: “a cathedral for the poor”.

Experiential Elements

In addition to the knowledge of belief and practice, growth is undeniably a vital part. Similar to all learning processes, growth takes more than understanding and practice; the persistent motivation to seek more knowledge is at the heart of growth. In the case of Christian spirituality, it is the yearning for sanctification through the Holy Spirit that produces virtues²⁴ and accepting the truth, sometimes mysterious, that is

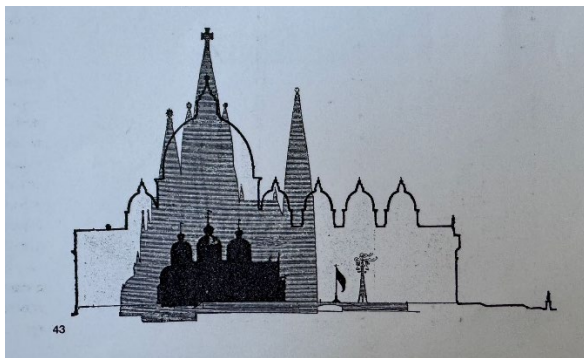
²² Holy Bible: New International Version (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc., 2011) Luke 1:26–38

²³ Antoni Gaudí, Correspondence, 1882–1883, Archive of the Sagrada Família Basilica, Barcelona.

²⁴ The Holy Bible: New International Version (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2011), Gal. 5:22–23.

beyond human understanding²⁵. Such a process seems to be happening merely in one's brain, which raises the question: How did Gaudí's design in the physical realm directly or indirectly motivate growth, if not, maintain the virtuous behaviour and belief?

While fear and growth never seemed to coexist harmoniously, fear and awe of the Creator is the foundation for growth in wisdom²⁶. Therefore, the debate lies in whether the design encapsulated human emotions of fear and awe. Gaudí chose to articulate such emotion through the scale and composition. The apse, which reached over 95 and 75 meters in length and height, with the Passion façade on one side and the Nativity façade on the other, symbolising death and birth respectively. Perpendicular to the apse is the nave, which, in Gothic cathedrals, represents the soul's journey from the Earthly realm toward the divine (from the entrance to the altar) to union with God²⁷. The duality of the nave in Sagrada Familia, the altar on the eastern side symbolising God, the Christ, and the western side symbolising the earthly realm, together conveyed the idea of progression from the material to the spiritual²⁸. Furthermore, the unity of the congregation before Christ, accentuated by the widest and tallest central nave and assistive roles of the saints, represented by the side aisles²⁹ illustrates the image of a growing community. Alternatively, in Dacher Keltner's research *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder* indicated the neurological connection of humans with physical height as a metaphor for spiritual superiority. For instance, a fMRI revealed that viewing elevated and tall structures triggers the temporoparietal junction³⁰, a region in the brain that is associated with transcendence and self-diminishment. Through its soaring verticality and deliberate symbolism, Gaudí conjured emotions of awe and mapped them onto the architecture itself.



(Figure 9. Comparison of the scale of Sagrada Familia in grey hatch with St. Peter's, Rome and St Mark's, Venice)

The interior decoration and sculptures also conveyed the idea of hierarchy and served as a reminder for worshippers. By tracing the northern elevation of the apse, a decorative hierarchy was obvious. Over the entrance portal stood St. Joseph holding a blossomed staff at the time he betrothed Mary. The statue stood on a flight of levitating stairs with a portal-shaped void behind the Charity façade. The walls of the rest of the lower segment were comparatively solid and gave the impression of a stone wall. Small balconies protruded and were supported by a range of corbels from circular to rectangular shapes. The impression of a structured, repetitive appearance seemingly references the architecture of humans, representing the realm of Earth. St. Joseph, the righteous and virtuous man³¹ who exhibited the esteemed

²⁵ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 1 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 11:33.

²⁶ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), Prov. 1:7.

²⁷ Benedict XVI. "General Audience of 18 November 2009: The Cathedral from the Romanesque to the Gothic Architecture. The Theological Background." Vatican.va. Accessed April 14, 2025. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20091118.html.

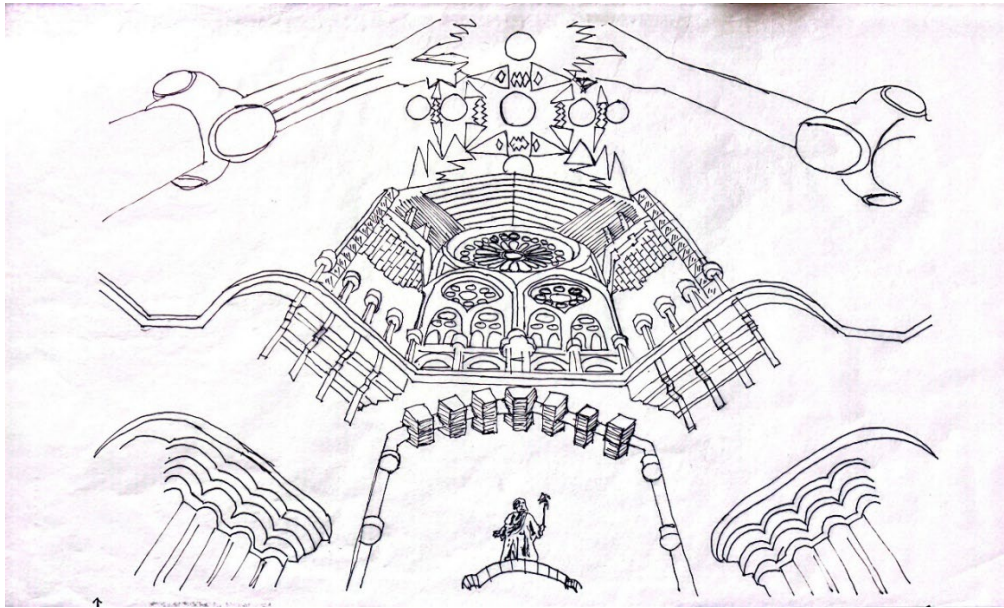
²⁸ Santiago Huerta, "Structural Design in the Work of Gaudí," 2006, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/dc704df84d9fa06b12106a831c9b5fdfadc12ba4>.

²⁹ Kaarwan, "The Spiritual Symbolism of Gothic Architecture," n.d., accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.kaarwan.com/blog/architecture/spiritual-symbolism-of-gothic-architecture?id=615>.

³⁰ Keltner, Dacher. *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder*. New York: Penguin Press, 2023.

³¹ The Holy Bible: New International Version (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2011), Matthew 1:19

quality of obedience³², stood between the overarching columns, acted as a role model for believers to strive towards.



(Figure 10. Elevation tracing of the Nativity Façade with St. Joseph)

One would have also noticed that the columns of the Sagrada Família were unique at their time. The complex yet mysterious design raised doubts about the intent. Gaudí created them in a biomimicry approach that mirrors tree trunks and branches. These 'trees' aligned along the nave and the apse resembled a 'stone forest'. The fact that nature is intricately designed, beautiful, yet unpredictable, constantly reminds humans of their vulnerability. Gaudí's decision to incorporate nature, the creation of God, is inarguably a reminder of his power and magnificence. Moreover, the columns supported the hyperboloid vaults that provided stronger structural support for the cathedral, allowing wider openings along the façade to maximize the amount of daylight to enter.

The play of light is considered a distinctive feature of Gaudí's design, moreover, light also holds profound symbolic significance in the Christian spirituality, where it epitomized God's identity, presence and revelation³³. The inner faces of the Sagrada Família were widely composed of colour-stained glass windows created by Jean Vila-Grau. A common combination of a trio consisting of one rose-stained-glass window and two lancet windows underneath was constructed from colourful glass fragments. Its effect, a vibrant rhythm of light projected around the upper walls where the colours gradually diffuse from the 'Heavens' to 'Earth'. While traditional Gothic Cathedrals' stained-glass windows often depict biblical stories through figurative arrangement, Gaudí leaned towards the approach of abstract colour gradients. Instead of elaborate stories and figures, an articulate atmosphere was created that set the tone. Two contrasting tones, in fact, for each of the East and West facades. On one hand, the Nativity façade exhibited a cooler, blueish tone. On the other hand, the Passion Façade radiated intense colour of red and orange. That leads to the question: What was the intent of such a decision?

³² The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), Matt. 2:13-23.

³³ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011). 1 John 1:5, New International Version.

The use of colours in the colour-stained windows also played a vital role in Christianity. The symbolism of ‘heavenly love, truth’³⁴ in blue, ‘life, growth and victory over death’³⁵ in green, ‘jealousy and betrayal’³⁶ in yellow and ‘both love, hate and sacrifice’³⁷ in Red. Each façade showcased the thematic display of colour related to its symbolism. Nativity façade, the birth and life of Christ; brought forth tones of ‘love, life and growth’ and Passion façade; suffering, death and resurrection; reflected in the intensity of the warm tones. In fact, according to a study, such sensory stimuli could foster a deeper connection with the sacred³⁸. One revealed the impact of colour on neuropsychological responses; Blue is associated with peace; Green is psychological restoration; Red elevates heart rates and arousal and yellow evokes warmth and joy³⁹. In 2024, a study⁴⁰ recorded 100 participants in religious spaces and found that colour significantly affects spiritual engagement, with 78% reporting heightened emotional connection in environments using symbolic hues. From the result, one could propose that these extravagantly hued glasses made a genuine impact on the experiential aspect. Whether or not invoking psychological influence was in Gaudí’s original intention, the incorporation of these colours elevated the spatial quality, cultivated atmosphere of awe, and thus evoked a sense of the sublime.



(Figure 11, 12. Left: View along the nave, distinctive moods. Right: Colour-stained windows)

Community Dynamics

These sacred truths, once gathered within the temple walls, must now be carried forth as living testimony preached to ‘neighbours’. The final aspect of fulfilling social responsibilities, including fellowships that provide mutual support, ministries that serve the needy in the community and leaders that hold accountability. This chapter focuses on whether the cathedral reflected such themes and the perception of the public.

³⁴ Christiansymbols.net, 2025; Russian Icon Collection, n.d.

³⁵ The Bible. Psalm 1:3, ESV

³⁶ Christiansymbols.net, 2025

³⁷ Russian Icon Collection, n.d.; Reasons for Hope* Jesus, 2022

³⁸ Kaplan, R., & Kaplan, S. (1989). The experience of nature: A psychological perspective. Cambridge University Press.

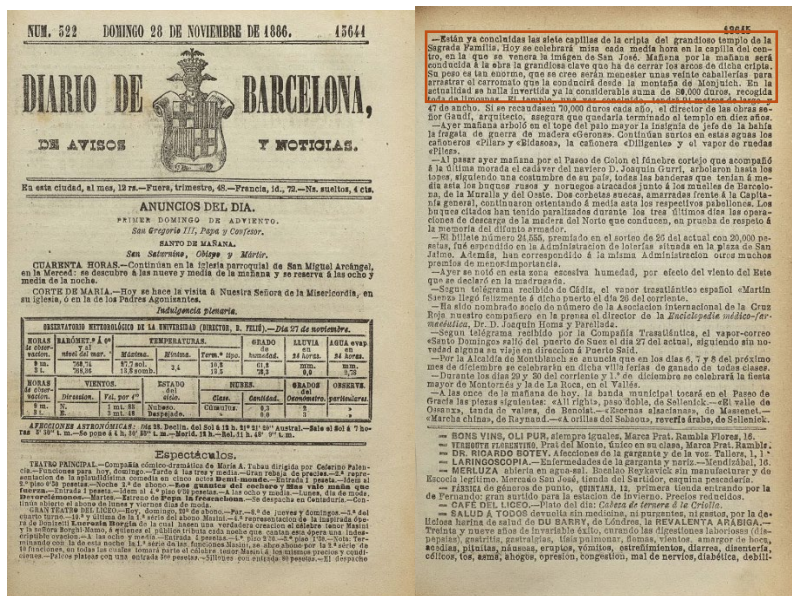
³⁹ Ajase. (2024). Enhancing user experience and cognitive design in public spaces. Asian Journal of Applied Science and Engineering, 13(1).

⁴⁰ Ajase. (2024). Enhancing user experience and cognitive design in public spaces. Asian Journal of Applied Science and Engineering, 13(1).



(Figure 13. 1906 edition of La Veu de Catalunya)

The basilica was well acclaimed during its early construction. La Veu de Catalunya, a Catalan newspaper in 1885, praised Gaudí's effort that focused on preserving the vision of the cathedral, and his refrain from excessive decorative effects, which would have undermined the harmony with the majesty⁴¹. Another publication in 1886 documented the cathedral's inaugural public service and described the 'magnificence' of the crypt⁴².

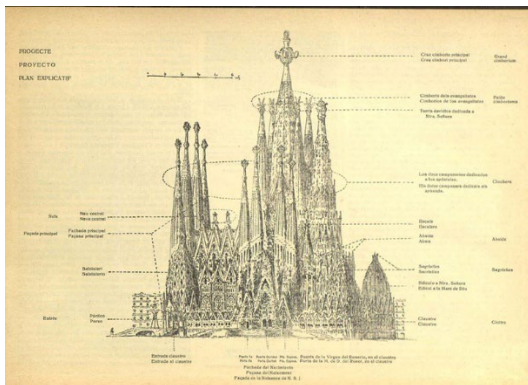


(Figure 14. La Veu de Catalunya article, 1886)

⁴¹ "El Temple de la Sagrada Família," La Veu de Catalunya, January 12, 1906, 1, Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, accessed via <https://ahcbdigital.bcn.cat/hemeroteca/visualitzador/ahcb-d110636?search=gaudi%20sagrada%20familia>.

⁴² "Les obres de la Sagrada Família," La Veu de Catalunya, November 28, 1886, 3, Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, accessed via <https://ahcbdigital.bcn.cat/hemeroteca/visualitzador/ahcb-d111500?search=gaudi%20sagrada%20familia>.

Yet, the supposedly Christian motif had not always been pure throughout the Sagrada Família's construction. It is not uncommon for religion to be used as a tool other than its original intent. For instance, when the plan of the Sagrada Família was first published in 1906 by *La Veu de Catalunya*. The news elicited mixed reactions from nationalist pride to ideological opposition that debated the role of the cathedral within the society. On the one hand, Catalan nationalists labelled it as a "classical temple for all Catalans"⁴⁶, and the Lliga presented Gaudí as "the genius of Catalonia", which utilised the cathedral as a tool for public approval and to attract financial contributors. The act belaboured that by such, forgiveness could be 'bought'⁴⁷. Christian spirituality, nonetheless, stated that repentance and faith⁴⁸ are the keys to earning forgiveness—the act of confessing one's sin and receiving the grace through Christ⁴⁹. The purpose of the cathedral was manipulated by the authoritative party, which was an obvious deviation from the gospel. On the other hand, left-wing and anarchists associated the cathedral as an instrument of conservation and religious propaganda by the Catholic church and the government to divert social and economic issues at the time. Furthermore, the fusion of Gothic and Art Nouveau styles sparked controversy among architects and designers, heightened the tension between traditionalism and modernism in Spain.



(Figure 15. Àlbum del Temple)

⁴³ “Sagrada Família Schools,” Wikipedia, last modified February 11, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sagrada_Fam%C3%ADlia_Schools.

⁴⁴ Luis Huete, “Antoni Gaudí, the Masterpiece of the Sagrada Familia,” Luis Huete (blog), accessed April 15, 2025, <https://luishuete.com/en/antoni-gaudi-the-masterpiece-of-the-sagrada-familia/>.

⁴⁵The Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV), Matthew 22:39.

⁴⁶ Newcastle University. (2022). Conversation Sagrada Familia - Press Office. Retrieved from <https://www.ncl.ac.uk>

⁴⁷ Crameri, K. (2021, December 20). The Sagrada Família: How Gaudí's masterpiece became a myth and a divisive political tool. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/the-sagrada-familia-how-gaudis-masterpiece-became-a-myth-and-a-divisive-political-tool-173456>

⁴⁸ The Bible. Acts 3:19. ESV

⁴⁹ The Bible. Ephesians 1:7. ESV

During Gaudí's final years from 1914 to 1926, he devoted himself fully to the work of the Sagrada Família. Around that period, the Temple Albums (Àlbum del Temple) of the Sagrada Família, published by Asociación Espiritual de Devotos de San José served as both documentary and devotional records of the Sagrada Família's construction and symbolism, which also played a crucial role in fundraising through private contributions. Gaudí's theory and philosophies, and critiques on the project were also included. The church was regarded as 'the alma of the whole of Spain' and 'The Temple of Atonement'. It is evident that the album sacralised philanthropy that encouraged donors to engage in the 'divine' mission. In all, the cathedrals' contested history showed tension between the spiritual model and earthly motivations, and the true influence of Christian spirituality remained debatable.

Conclusion

The question of whether Antoni Gaudí's design of Sagrada Família enriched Christian spirituality goes beyond a simple response of architectural language but the amalgamation of architectural quality, personal enlightenment and social impact. Assessing the cathedral with the four major aspects of Christian spirituality, we found that Gaudí's transformation of the basilica involved numerous intentional, deeply symbolic design elements and encouragement of virtuous services.

It is indisputable that the design decision for every element reflected the Trinitarian theology and doctrine of Scripture. Each of the grand facades: Nativity, Passion and Glory depicted the thematic story of Christ's life and events unfolding around him. Studying both the Nativity and Passion façades reveals the heavy use of symbolism throughout the composition. This method of design, unique to Gaudí, effectively visualised Christian spirituality on the skin of the cathedral. Morals and virtues mentioned in biblical stories were translated from a vague concept into a tangible image for service attendees and passersby.

Beyond doctrine, the Sagrada Família was conceived as a space for the practices of faith. Even though it is impossible to qualify the level of practices such as prayer and worship. Gaudí's decision to expand the nave and apse, which edified the spatial quality, thus the addition of worship space, like the crypt, reflected the attentive intent to enhance the worship service for all people, regardless of class and profession. The increased accessibility of Christian practice brought forward by such a design motif is undeniable.

The unique design also fostered spiritual growth and transformation. The spatial qualities of Sagrada Família transcended the physical realm and invoked human emotions of awe and holy fear towards the creator. The monumental scale and verticality, together with the vibrant lighting created by colour-stained glass, elicited an impactful psychological effect on worshippers. Besides, the decorative motifs of the interior and the biomimicry design of columns also reflected the hierarchical nature of the world and God, a contrast between mankind's vulnerability and the Creator's dominance.

Lastly, the Sagrada Família had been an Instigator for community dynamics. During the church's construction, it showcased the Christian core of service, support, and fellowship. The school Gaudí built is one of the examples that exemplified the conviction to serve both God and the community. Despite the tension between spiritual ideals and political, ideological, and aesthetic agendas, which had convoluted the purpose of the cathedral, such complexity was never in the intention of Gaudí.

To sum, the Sagrada Família catalysed and fostered the four core aspects of Christian spirituality through its endeavours of design in the physical realm. A lasting impact brought by symbolic language, immersive atmosphere and communal commitments that invite all towards the sublime.

Use of AI

The use of AI software like GPT in areas of research, pinpointing target articles to read and occasional summarisation. It is also used to consolidate references and sources.

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