



Churches and the natural world

Sense Making Faith p 2



Churches have long been associated with the natural world in which they are located. The building of a new church was not just a matter of erecting a structure on any plot of land available, but of a careful harmonizing of the building with its location. This was an important part of traditional architecture and building crafts. Many churches were built on sites of previous worship and sacred significance and some of them simply assumed or incorporated elements of the previous worship site into their construction. There are a number of good examples of this in Rome. The previous sites were often chosen because of some sacred connection to the natural world, such as a sacred spring or well. The famous Pantheon in Rome has an opening in the ceiling which lets in both sun and rain.

Many churches are oriented east-west, so that the light of the rising sun comes in above the altar. The Christian religion contains a great deal of imagery about Christ being the light of the world, and the light which banishes darkness, so churches would also reflect that kind of language. For example, the gospel of John says of Jesus 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it' (John 1.5) Easter services, with their imagery of light and darkness would traditionally be held so that worshippers entered into darkness with Christ and finished when resurrection and dawn would come together.

Some ancient churches also had signs of the zodiac or star patterns on the ceiling or floor, reminding people in the church of the night sky, the passing of the seasons or the place of human beings within the vastness of the universe. Churches were therefore related to the cosmos, uniting God and human beings within time and space. Sometimes these star patterns were included so the sun coming in would track the calendar, turning the church into a sundial for the whole year. People would then know the date and time, not only for their daily lives, but for the church's year of readings and festivals, by seeing which bit was currently lit up in the church. Similarly, statues of saints could be placed where the sun would find them on their special feast day.

One of the most interesting uses of the church as a sundial and calendar is at Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome. Pope Clement XI commissioned Francesco Bianchini to incorporate such a sundial. Bianchini's sundial was built along the meridian that crosses Rome, at longitude $12^{\circ} 50'$. The meridian line is 45 m long, and made of bronze, enclosed in yellow-white marble. At solar noon, around 12.15 p.m. (1.15 p.m. in summer time), the sun shines through a small hole in the wall and hits the line each day. At the summer solstice, the sun appears highest, and its ray hits the meridian line at the point closest to the wall. At the winter solstice, the ray crosses the line at the point furthest from the wall. At either equinox, the sun touches the line exactly halfway between the two furthest points.

Bianchini also added holes in the ceiling to mark the passage of stars. Inside the dark interior, Polaris, Arcturus and Sirius are visible through these holes, even in bright midday.

Star patterned ceilings and floors, quite apart from their decorative purpose also reminded people that even if they were in a building with walls and a roof, being a Christian commits a person to being part of the world, part of God's cosmic plan. Being in church locates a person within nature, within the world and also within the universe, superimposing local worship with the whole Christian community past and present.

Below are details of some churches you can explore. The links take you to sites with good pictures and information about the construction and layout of the particular buildings.

Vezelay, France

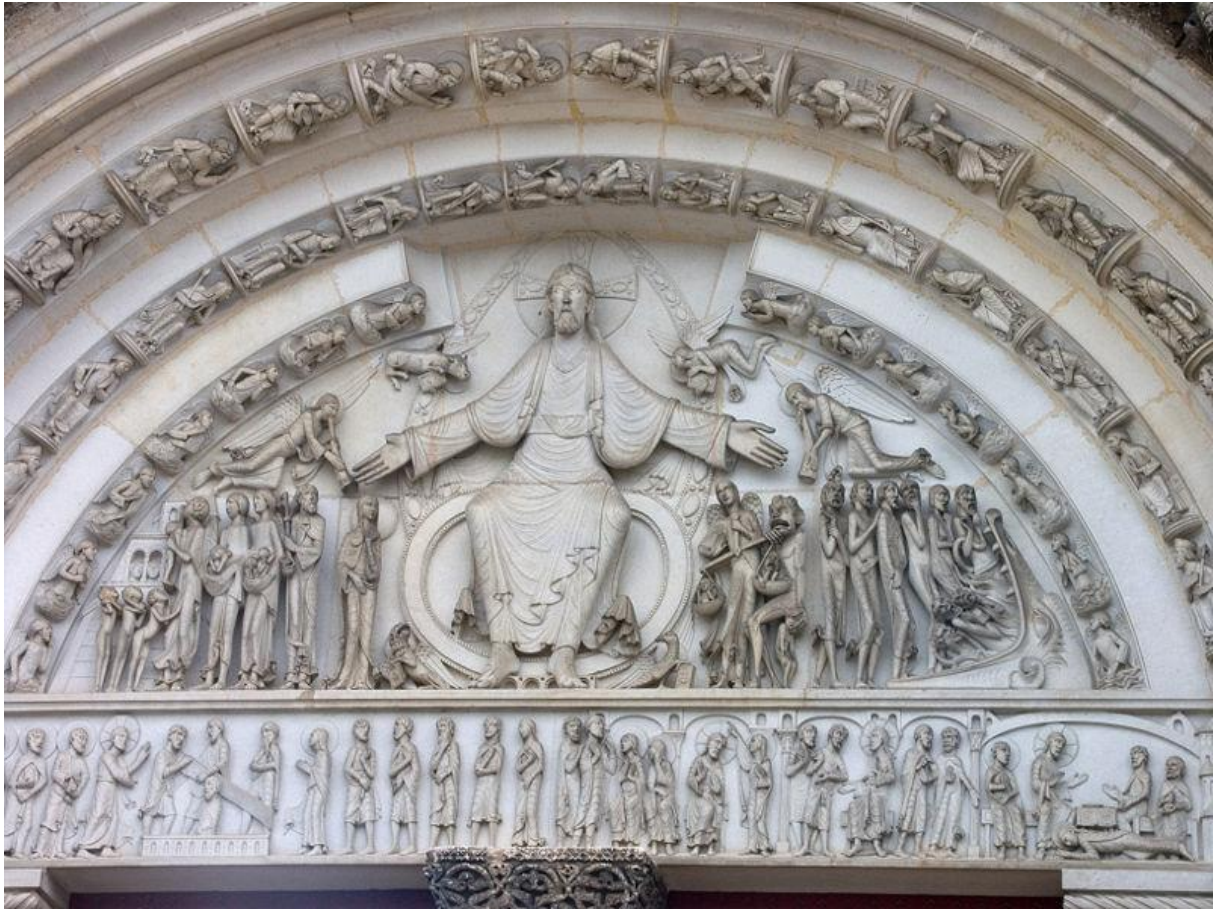


Photo by Jean-Christophe Benoist

<http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?c=vezelay&page=index>

San Miniato, Florence, Italy



<http://www.paradoxplace.com/Perspectives/Italian%20Images/Montages/Firenze/San%20Miniato.htm>

<http://www.borghiditoscana.net/eng/tuscany/firenze/firenze/sanminiatoalmonite/sacrestia.html>

This link below details how a night sky was painted to resemble the same sky at the time of Jesus' birth.

<http://www.astronomy.com/asy/default.aspx?c=a&id=2526>



Photo by Margaret Coolen

The Pantheon in Rome



<http://www.italyguides.it/us/roma/pantheon.htm>

Santa Maria degli Angeli, Rome

<http://www.santamariadegliangeliroma.it/index.htm?lingua=INGLESE&ca mbialingua=SI>