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Sacred Space and Sensory Experience Late Antique Churches

Béatrice Caseau

After Constantine (r. 306-37) lavishly granted money to the Roman Church and allowed other Churches to reclaim their confiscated properties, the building and adornment of Christian basilicas developed on an unprecedented scale. The interior spaces of churches changed to accommodate larger crowds. As the increasing number of conversions brought new wealth to the Churches, bishops were able to start paying skilled workers to embellish the recently erected or restored buildings. As a result, a Christian living in Rome during the first half of the fourth century would have seen new buildings adorned thanks to imperial generosity, and come upon many skilled artisans working on mosaics, marbles, and liturgical implements. The experience of such a Christian upon entering the Lateran cathedral in the fourth or fifth century was very different from that of a second-century Christian, upon going to house-churches for the liturgy, or from that of a contemporary peasant, upon coming to pray in a newly-erected village church.¹ A poor and simply-adorned rural shrine was quite different a sight from the splendid Hagia Sophia cathedral after its reconstruction in the middle of the sixth century (Fig. 1).

Naturally, we are far more informed about wealthy churches, built by aristocrats or by the emperors, than we are about lowly chapels. Accounts are influenced by remaining sources and tend to reflect the experiences of urban Late Antique Christians in the period between the fourth and sixth centuries. We have very little information concerning church architecture prior to the fourth century, because the persecution of Diocletian (303-11) against Christians destroyed or confiscated many church buildings. Archaeological evidence for these early

churches is practically nonexistent, with the exception of the famous house-church of Dura Europos. In comparison, we have a lot more textual and archaeological evidence for churches in the period between the fourth and sixth centuries: poems in praise of a building, *ekphrasis*, allusions in sermons or in saints *Lives*, inventories and excavations. These can all be used to recreate what a visitor could see, smell, hear and touch in a Christian basilica. These primary sources attest that participation in the liturgy and the visiting of churches brought on a rich set of sensory experiences.

Sacred Spaces in Churches: The Layout

After the persecution of Diocletian and the legal recognition of the Christian religion, bishops started rebuilding the destroyed churches. Eusebius of Caesarea describes one of these churches. Located in Tyre, it was rebuilt on a much larger scale by its bishop, Paulinus: "He spread out a vast and lofty entrance-gate affording a full view of what lay inside even to those who stood far away from the sacred precinct."² An atrium adorned with porticoes and fountains separated the outer entrance from the church: "This is the first halting-place for those who enter, affording both beauty and splendor to everyone, and serving as an appropriate station for those who as yet lack the first initiation."³ For his rebuilt church, Paulinus adopted the plan of a basilica: a central nave and two lateral aisles, divided by a row of columns. This was to become the standard layout for a church. Eusebius describes the efforts of the bishop to make this church magnificent: the central door, "he decorated sumptuously with iron-bound appliques of bronze and carved ornaments ... and the basilica, he furnished with an abundance of rich materials, applying a plentiful liberality in its expenses."⁴ Roofed with cedar beams and paved with marbles, this church was a typical example of the Christian churches built during the Late Antique period.

Eusebius is satisfied with this building, not only because it is beautifully adorned, but also because it creates a gradation of spaces, from the less sacred to the most: "He placed the sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, in the center, and so that this too should be inaccessible to the multitude, he fenced it off with wooden lattices perfectly fashioned with artful workmanship - an admirable sight to the beholder."⁵

A Biblical scholar, the model Eusebius had in mind was the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem, with its different courtyards and its most sacred areas reserved only to clerics. This identification of churches with the Temple of Jerusalem led to identify different areas inside churches. Of these, the most sacred location was usually the altar area, where the bread and wine is transformed into Body and Blood of Christ. Eusebius emphasized the necessity to fence it and restrict access to it. Inside many Late antique churches, chancel barriers were added to mark the separate area of the sanctuary. Unlike later Byzantine or Russian iconostasis, they did not intend to block the view, but to delineate a threshold between two areas of different sacredness (Fig. 2).

The sacrality of a church complex can be measured in terms of access to its different areas. Unlike entrance to the atrium, entrance to the church interior was not granted to all. In some regions, such as Syria, men and women had separate entrances. Doorkeepers or deacons were often in charge of allocating different sections for the faithful coming to the liturgy, based on sex, age and rank. The fourth century compilation of church orders known as the Apostolic Constitutions insists on allocating a specific area of the church nave to the different age groups and on separating the sexes: "In church, the young will sit separately if there is room, otherwise they shall remain standing; the elder shall sit at their rank, children shall stand and their fathers and mothers shall take care of them; the young girls will sit apart if there is room, otherwise they shall stand behind the women; the married women accompanied by children shall stand apart; virgins, widows and elderly women shall stand or sit in front of

the other women."⁶ Another hierarchy was spatially visible among members of the community: clerics, baptized Christians and non-baptized Christians had different sitting or standing areas. The catechumens were part of the Christian community but had not received baptism; thus, they could sing the prayers and hear readings and sermons, but they had to leave before the consecration of the Eucharistic elements. Their place was behind the faithful. Pagans, Jews, Christians of other faiths could also hear the first part of the liturgy if they wished to, but they, too, had to leave before the Eucharistic celebration. They probably remained at the back of the church, or possibly in the narthex, with the excommunicated members of the community. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (8. 6) record a common dismissal for those who are not believers and those who are "listeners" in the community. This spatial organization for members of the community and visitors is mostly found in normative texts and we cannot be sure it was enforced everywhere. It represents an ideal spatialization in the eyes of clerics. Certain areas were reserved for the clergy: the ambo, where reading took part in some Eastern churches; the sanctuary, reserved for the clerics of higher ranks; and some closed rooms such as the *skeuophylakion* (treasury). In the East and in the West, the area of the main altar where the Eucharist was offered and where Christ himself resided in the bread and wine, remained the focal point of the sacred.

The progressive exclusion of laypeople from the sanctuary, the most sacred area, was achieved between the fifth and the seventh centuries in the Eastern provinces.⁷ Consequently, in Late Antique churches, all spaces were not equal. The gradient of sacrality inside the church progressed from the outside courtyard, open to anybody, to the narthex, then to the nave and, finally, to the sanctuary. The extent to which these rules of spatialization were enforced varied from church to church. In the Hagia Sophia or in the Lateran church, where numerous clerics were in charge of supervising the building, anyone who wandered from his or her proper place was probably easily spotted. In healing sanctuaries, such as the shrine of

Cosmas and Damianos in Constantinople, that received many visitors, a curious pagan could spend some time in the sanctuary and even taste the reserved Eucharist without being admonished (if the conversion story of one such a pagan can be taken at face value).⁸ It is difficult to evaluate the freedom of movement of people inside churches, but, except where chancel barriers clearly delimited spaces, it was probably important. Augustine recalls chatting with women inside the church during the liturgy, something John Chrysostom reproves: “Indeed you ought to have an interior wall to separate you from the women, but since you don’t want to, our fathers thought it necessary to wall you off with these boards.”⁹

The experiences of Christians inside churches were not limited to their participation in liturgical prayers. Christians visited churches not only during the liturgical ceremonies, but also for personal expressions of devotion.¹⁰ The cult of saints was highly developed; laypeople came to churches to offer their prayers and their gifts to the saints in exchange for their protection. When the terrible earthquake that destroyed Antioch struck in 526, the mother of Symeon Stylite the younger was praying in the church of Saint Stephen while her young son was playing in the atrium.¹¹ During such visits, Christians would go to the part of the church where either a tomb or a reliquary was located and sometimes light a censer so that the fragrant smoke could carry their prayers to the saint. They would also take some of the oil burning in the lamp above the tomb home as a *eulogia*, a blessing and a medicine. Such visits were frequent, turning the *atria* of the martyria into social spaces. One would take a stroll to a church compound and spend some time chatting in the porticoes of the atrium, before going inside to offer prayers.

In healing sanctuaries, sick or troubled Christians spent nights inside the church, in the hopes that a saint would come and offer them a way to heal or a solution to their worries. Entering a church at night in preparation for incubation was a completely different experience from participating in a daytime ceremony. The crippled and the sick were brought inside the

church in hopes of a miracle. The wealthiest paid to have a place close to the relics, while the poor lay further away in a corner. All hoped to see the church's saint in their dreams. In the Egyptian shrine of saints Cyrus and John, they remained in the poorly-lit church all night until the warden came with a censer to refresh the air and to wake everyone up: the church had to be emptied in preparation for the morning liturgy.¹²

On festive days, churches were particularly adorned and filled with lights and incense. Bishop Remigius made celebratory preparations in the churches as well as in the city of Reims for the baptism of King Clovis: "He ordered the baptismal pool to be readied. The public squares were draped with colored cloths, the churches were adorned with white hangings, the baptistery was prepared, sticks of incense gave off clouds of perfume, sweet-smelling candles gleamed bright and the holy place of baptism was filled with divine fragrance."¹³

One could visit the Hagia Sophia church on a sunny day and would be impressed by the light flowing from the cupola. The same church provided yet another impression when filled with people and the numerous cantors singing the liturgy, or at night with numerous oil lamps shining in large bronze lighting devices. Such diverse sensory experiences explain why the perception of a church varied greatly depending on the person, the time of day of the visit and on the particular church. When Late Antique Christians visited a church, whether during the liturgy or at some other time, their senses were stimulated in many ways. Let us take an imaginary stroll inside a church and try to capture how the senses were called to the feast.¹⁴

Touch

Past the atrium, its porticoes and fountains, a visitor's first contact with the church was probably with its door curtains. Many doors of Late Antique basilicas were protected and

adorned with curtains that slightly obscured the view of the nave, yet were inviting to those inside the space warmed by its presence¹⁵ (Fig. 3). Church curtains are rarely preserved, yet they still deserve our attention for many reasons.¹⁶ They changed the church acoustics, absorbed the smell of incense and sometimes bore religious scenes or figures. Curtains had a practical use: they were used to keep bugs and birds outside the building. Inside the church, they held symbolic significance as well: they marked the threshold of the nave and of other sections of the church. While we have a number of textiles that could once have been door curtains, it is very difficult to sort ecclesiastical curtains from domestic ones. It is likely that some ecclesiastical curtains were adorned with images; these were either geometrical motives, images of saints or scenes from the New Testament.

Reactions to these adorned curtains were mixed in the fourth century. Epiphanius of Salamis ripped away a village church curtain on which the image of Christ had been embroidered.¹⁷ He found offensive that the image of Christ should be accessible to any hand, on such a mundane object. Few seem to have shared his sentiment as the use of adorned curtains continued. The emperors themselves approved curtains and considered them an appropriate gift: emperor Constantius offered the Hagia Sophia splendid golden door curtains for its dedication.¹⁸

Textiles were also sometimes present on walls or in between columns. Gregory of Tours tells the story of a thief stealing precious objects from the church of Brioude : “He ripped a cross with glittering jewels from the top [of the tomb] and tossed it to the ground ; then he gathered curtains and drapes hanging on the surrounding walls. From them he made up a single bundle and put it across his shoulders.”¹⁹

Curtains created visible boundaries and enhanced important areas, such as the sanctuary. In the churches of Pella, holes were drilled in the columns to fix rods and hang curtains, either to separate a space for women or simply to adorn the nave with hangings that could be tied up between the columns.²⁰ In Rome, different sets of curtains, which changed with the liturgical period adorned doors, canopies and walls of the basilicas. When, by the end of the Late Antique period, many writers presented churches as miniature reconstitutions of the Jerusalem temple, curtains were finally understood to represent the veil of Solomon's Temple. Textiles contrasted with the smooth marble slabs that adorned the lower parts of the walls, and sometimes also the floors, in richly decorated churches. The predilection for all colors of marble explains not only the opus sectile of some marble floors, but also the slabs of different types of marble that adorned the walls.

Pious visitors often made gestures of devotion, such touching the floor in humble adoration of the divine presence, or kissing columns, doors and icons, when they entered a shrine.²¹ Late Antique Christians tried to establish a personal contact with the saints. Communicating with the world of the saints was often done by touching something linked to the saints' physical presence on earth: a tomb holding a saint's body or objects a saint once held. They enjoyed carrying eulogies, tokens or even relics, in the hope that these objects had the power to protect them (Fig. 4).

For Christ himself, particular devotion was given to the instruments used to torture him: the cross, the nails, the column of flagellation...²² Seeing a relic, such as the cross of the Savior, conjured many emotions: awe, gratitude, repentance and an understanding of one's sins. Paulinus of Nola mentions this range of feelings: "Once you think that you behold the wood on which our Salvation, the Lord of Majesty, was hanged with nails whilst the world trembled, you too must tremble, but you must also rejoice."²³ Touching and kissing the relic of the cross is mentioned in a letter attributed to Paula, the Roman aristocrat friend of Jerome:

"then shall we touch with our lips the wood of the true cross."²⁴ After an enthusiastic pilgrim bit part of the holy cross, in Jerusalem, such personal contact was later to be done only on festive occasions, and under the supervision of a *stavrophylax*, keeper of the cross.²⁵ In the seventh century, the relic of the cross was brought to the imperial palace in Constantinople and kept in a locked reliquary, called a *staurothek*.

Arculf, a Gallic bishop who travelled to the East on a pilgrimage in the 680s, witnessed the devotion of the Constantinopolitans to the relic of the cross. For three days during the Holy week before Easter, the cross was taken out of its reliquary and presented to be kissed first on Thursday by the men (led by the emperor), then on Friday by the empress and the women, and finally on Saturday by the clergy.²⁶ Arculf told Adomnan of Iona that wonderfully fragrant oil oozes from the wood of the cross, the sweet smell of which is enjoyed when the reliquary is opened. A small drop of this oil was rumored to cure all illnesses.

Smell

After touch, smell was the second sense that would reveal to a visitor the type of building he or she was entering. Inside a Christian basilica, if the liturgy had just been celebrated, the smell of incense and the perfumes of the lamps would immediately be noticeable. Absorbed by the curtains and other textiles, the perfume would linger in the building for a long time, decreasing in strength until a deacon again swung a lit censer to refresh the air and to honor people or images. The perfume of carefully mixed incense identified an area as a Christian sacred space. The Old Testament reveals the composition of the sacred incense offered to God in the temple of Jerusalem. A mixture of incenses also perfumed the churches, but it was probably not as complex. In it, frankincense and myrrh were often the primary ingredients,

but they could be mixed up with less expensive resins like pine resins.²⁷ For the faithful, the odor of incense was a reminder of the perfumes of paradise, an open window into the invisible other world, realized by the sense of smell. The Song of Songs delineates the wonderful perfumes of the groom (which the Christian tradition identifies with Christ himself). The perfumes floating in the churches were meant to help the faithful realize His invisible presence amongst his people. It transformed churches into God's residence on earth, a place to where angels flew to participate in the liturgy.

Yet incense also had funerary connotations. In the Anastasis church in Jerusalem, which the pilgrim Egeria visited in the 380s, incense was lit on Sundays as soon as the rooster sang. The bishop opened the chapel, filled it with the smell of incense and spoke of Jesus' resurrection.²⁸ In that particular circumstance, incense was taken as a reminder of the spices brought by the women who hoped to embalm Jesus, but found him to no longer be in the tomb. In other churches, the liturgical censuring of the altar played the same role: it represented the perfumes carried by the myrrhophores, the myrrh-bearing women.

The funerary connotations of incense were mixed with its ability to rise towards the sky and carry prayers to God. Gregory of Tours speaks of the miraculous cure of a dumb girl near the tomb of Saint Martin in Tours. The child was able to speak when her mother held her over the fragrant smoke of the censer she had lit.²⁹ Censers were often available around saints' tombs in the 6th century; worshippers would light them before praying. By the 5th century, even smaller churches had a censer among their liturgical vessels.³⁰

In this olfactory culture, bad smells were linked to demons and illnesses, while sweet odors and spices had origins in Paradise and reflected its divine or holy inhabitants. To render manifest the presence of God, churches were made as fragrant as possible by the incense burning in censers at fixed times during the day and the oils poured in the numerous oil lamps

in wealthy churches (which could afford such costly perfumes). In the baptistery of the Lateran basilica, a censer and a candle filled with balsam spread fragrance throughout the space.³¹ Perfume was a symbol of God's presence. Spaces and people consecrated to God received this perfumed seal: the *myron*, the perfume of Holy Spirit, anointed newly-baptized and newly consecrated altars or churches.³²

Sight

Touch and smell were not the favorite senses of the ancient philosophers, who considered them low in the hierarchy of senses, but they were probably the most enriching to the religious experience of Late Antique Christians.³³ We should not, however, overlook sight, traditionally considered the most important of the five human senses. "When you enter the church," writes the rhetor Choricus of Gaza, "you will be staggered by the variety of the spectacle."³⁴ Choricus goes on to describe every part of the building, lingering on its architecture and ornaments. Unlike temples of the gods, which were often divided into several spaces by walls, Christian basilicas were open spaces up to the end of the apse. A visitor could see the entire building in one glance. Barriers existed to separate certain spaces, but they were low and did not obstruct the view of the sanctuary.³⁵

Thus, the visitor of a Christian church between the 4th and 6th centuries would have been immediately struck by the influx of light and by the diverse colors of the interior decoration. Writers mention the multiple colors of the different slabs of marble and sometimes discuss the origins of the various types of marble. Uniformity was not a point of concern, as Procopius reveals in his description of the Hagia Sophia: "Who could recount the beauty of the columns and the marbles with which the church is adorned? One might imagine that one has chanced upon a meadow in full bloom. For one would surely marvel at the purple

hue of some, the green of others, at those on which the crimson blooms, at those that flash with white."³⁶

Mosaics and paintings also adorned many churches with figurative, geometric and vegetal motives. The mixture of scenes from the Bible, portraits of saints and representations of nature, is a distinctive feature of this period.³⁷ In the circular chapel of Santa Costanza thought to be from the early 4th century, one can see vivid rural scenes; in the baptisteries of Ravenna from the 5th century, mosaics show the baptism of Christ and portraits of biblical figures set in gold or deep blue backgrounds.

Narrative paintings imparted religious tales to the illiterate and provoked pious emotional responses from viewers. Asterius of Amasea praises a painting depicting the martyrdom of Saint Euphemia, because it manages to convey both the modesty and the courage of the saint. The painting "artfully delineating the whole story on canvas" was placed next to her tomb where pilgrims could see it and be impressed and moved by the saint's story: "for the artist has so clearly painted the drops of blood that you might think them to be trickling down in very truth from her lips, and so you might depart weeping."³⁸

Churches were adorned to introduce the faithful to spiritual realities. In this respect, light was an important feature in Late Antique churches, "truly a place wherein light dwells," to quote Gregory Nazianzenus.³⁹ This aesthetic of brilliance and light was intended to make God's luminous presence felt, while the background gold tesserae of many mosaics intended to convey the warmth of divine light.⁴⁰ Religious discourse exploited the contrast between light and darkness to talk about good and evil, God and the devil. In order to take full advantage of this opportunity for a weighty metaphor, churches were built to be well-lit. Windows brought in natural sunlight, while lamps provided a mobile and perfumed light. A poem written in Syriac in praise of the restored cathedral of Edessa recalls the ceiling being

"adorned with golden mosaic as the firmament is with shining stars."⁴¹ The poem also comments on the smooth white marble slabs gathering light within themselves, not unlike the sun.

Lamps, too, played an important role in the aesthetics of the church.⁴² Oil lamps were numerous; their collective shimmer made the mosaics come alive. The central areas were lit by polykandela, which held many oil lamps, and chandeliers. Paul the Silentarius describes the beauty of the Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia church at night: "everything fills the eye with wonder. But no words are sufficient to describe the illumination in the evening: you might say that some nocturnal sun filled the majestic temple with light."⁴³ Paul describes in detail the numerous lamps present inside the church in the 6th century. The Hagia Sophia was a particularly luminous church, even by daylight: its cupola, some 30 meters above the ground, was surrounded by 40 windows, from which sunlight strikingly illuminated the center of the building.⁴⁴

Combining the Senses in Approaching God and His Saints

For Late Antique Christian writers, the sacred could be experienced through the senses. Churches offered multiple sensory experiences, through which the presence of God could be felt. The cognitive realization of His nature was done firstly through these sensory experiences. Hearing was, naturally, important. Churches were places where the Word of God was heard, preached and discussed. During the liturgy, there was an alternation between listening and singing. While the Bible was the most important text heard in churches, other texts such as *Saints' Lives* were also read to the gathered crowds. When churches had an ambo, readings could be done from there, so as to be better heard.⁴⁵ Silence was required so as to give the proclamation of God's message all the attention it deserved.⁴⁶

Afterwards, praise was expressed through hymns. In major churches, a body of cantors either sung on their own or led the singing of the crowd.⁴⁷ In Syria, alternate choirs of young boys and young girls raised their voices to God. Choirs of children were also appreciated, as the pilgrim Egeria noticed when she went to Jerusalem in the 380's. In some churches, singing was a clerical duty. In Antioch, where the body of Symeon rested in the cathedral, "the bishop of Antioch himself and all his clergy, every day as a mark of honor, chanted hymns of the spirit before him, and served with great silver censers of incense which they placed before him, continually burning all the time sweet odors and choice incense such as they burned when he was alive."⁴⁸

It has been said the Cistercian aesthetics or Reformed cult valued hearing above the other four senses, and that the Late Medieval western mystical culture overemphasized the importance of sight. For the Late Antique period, it is difficult to establish one sense as being more important than the others. For example, many Christians related to the Eucharist offering by giving of bread and wine and by seeing, with eyes of faith, the transformation of the elements on the altar into the Body and Blood of Christ. The meditative gazes of worshippers enhanced their veneration and prayer. Yet, sight was not considered sufficient by the preachers, who invited the faithful to touch and to taste the Body of Christ. Cyril of Jerusalem, a fourth century bishop, recommended that Christians take the time to appreciate the contact of their hands with the consecrated parcel holding Christ. This sanctification by contact was extremely important and considered an opportunity to sanctify the senses.⁴⁹ Taste, touch, sight and smell all played integral parts in the communion experience, along with the hearing of the invitation "Ta Hagia tois hagiois" (the holy things for the holy people).⁵⁰ It was a complete experience from a sensory point of view. The consecration of bread and wine transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ was the climax of the liturgical experience. It allowed the faithful to experience an intimate communion with Christ, as

Gabriel of Qatar (of the early 7th century) explains: "Whenever we take them (the parcels of consecrated bread) in our hands we ought thus to think that we are embracing and kissing our Saviour himself, as we mingle his Body in our body, and mix his Blood in our blood"⁵¹ (Fig. 5). If the altar was the focal point of the church, the chalice and the paten were the most precious liturgical vessels, as they were in contact with Christ's body. Donors wanted to have their name as close as possible to the consecrated elements and in prosperous regions, churches received gifts of liturgical vessels, which they kept in their treasury.

The faithful also combined vision with touch and taste when they came to pray to the saints. Gregory of Nyssa wrote of the feast of Saint Theodore: "Those who behold [the relics] embrace them as though the actual body, applying all their senses, eyes, mouth, and ears; then they pour forth tears for his piety and suffering, and bring forward their supplication to the martyr as though he were present and complete."⁵² Viewing a sacred area was an important religious experience for pilgrims, who often traveled long distances in hopes of seeing and touching relics and sites marked by events of the Biblical past. Seeing sites visited by Christ, the apostles or the saints led to devotional practices, such as recalling the texts describing the events. Egeria, for example, had someone read her the relevant Biblical passages on-site. In Edessa, she had the bishop lead the visit and explain to her the history of the site and its religious significance.⁵³ Seeing allowed one to bring the past into the present.⁵⁴

But pilgrims wanted to do more than just look. They touched reliquaries and holy places, they lit censers and lights and they filled little flasks with blessed oil, water or dust. This oil was later used as a medicine, rubbed on the sick body or sometimes tasted. They also brought back stamped blessed breads that were adorned with crosses, images of saints, scenes from the life of Christ or with representations of a sanctuary. An inscription often explained that they were "a blessing of the Lord."⁵⁵

Although the saints could be prayed to and called upon anywhere, Late Antique Christians developed the notion of a local sacrality. They believed that the saints heard prayers better when they were spoken from locations where the saints' relics were present. Jerome writes: "the man who has seen Judaea with his own eyes and who knows the sites of ancient cities and their names, whether the same or changed, will gaze more clearly upon Holy Scripture."⁵⁶ In a letter among those preserved by Jerome the Roman aristocrat Paula invites her friend Marcella to come and see for herself the *loca sancta* where mankind's salvation took place: "As often as we enter (the tomb) we see the Saviour in His grave clothes, and if we linger we see again the angel sitting at His feet, and the napkin folded at His head."⁵⁷ Preachers played a role in this development as they praised the positive effects of the saints' presence where their relics were kept.⁵⁸

Churches were built to facilitate the perception of God and his saints.⁵⁹ They were the privileged passages of communication between earth and heaven. This was particularly true during the liturgy. John Chrysostom writes in the *De sacerdotio*: "When you see the Lord sacrificed and lying before you, and the High Priest standing over the sacrifice and praying, and all who partake being tintured with that precious blood, can you still think that you are still among men and still standing on earth? Are you not at once driven to heaven?"⁶⁰ Seeing the Eucharist or the relics of the saints opened windows into the other world and summoned the presence of Christ and his saints. By his Incarnation, Christ made it possible to touch God through objects his contact had sanctified.

God could be experienced through different matter, such as the elements of the Eucharist. The faithful were called to "Taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34.8) They could smell God's presence through the sweet perfumes of incense. They could hear the voice of God through the innocent voices of children singing his praise, echoing the angels' song. For the 6th century Procopius, this feast of the senses was meant to lift the visitors'

minds up to God. Of the Hagia Sophia church, he writes: "He (God) cannot be far away, but must especially love to dwell in this place which He has chosen."⁶¹

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Captions:

1. Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, sixth century (Photo: Béatrice Caseau)
2. West basilica, Erythreon- Latrun, Lybia, chancel barrier. (Photo: Béatrice Caseau)
3. Saint Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, sixth century, mosaic. (Photo : Béatrice Caseau).
4. Basilica euphrasiana, Porec, Croatia, sixth century, mosaic. (Photo: Béatrice Caseau)
5. Paten showing Communion of the Apostles, c. 565-78, silver, gilding, and niello. (Photo: Dumbarton Oaks)

¹ Richard Krautheimer, *Rome. Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985); Kimberly Diane Bowes, *Private worship, public values, and religious change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² Eusebius of Cesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, X, 4, 38, transl. Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, Sources and Documents*, Toronto, 1986, 5.

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