



Student Work

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People and Places: The Evidence of Holiness

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This essay, co-written by two Dordt students, reflects on the intersection of faith and culture while on tour with Dordt University Concert Choir in Austria and the Czech Republic in May 2022.

The rustling bags finally grow quiet. The choir settles into a restless anticipation. As the first two chords of the song sound, many of us begin to smile unconsciously and our eyes flick upwards to the ornately detailed fresco. Those two notes are the only ones we'll sing of this song until we perform it, leaving the audience that has stopped to view the church eager for more, while we ourselves try to drink in the acoustics and grandeur of this place. We, too, are privy to the spellbinding power that captures the attention and imagination as these places fill with music. The nature of our placement effortlessly calls us to remember where and who we are, and to bring us into stories outside of ourselves.

Each chapel, church, and cathedral invites us to bask in the holiness of its place and participate in a church tradition dating back centuries. At that time the intricate construction, and the utilizing of saints, biblical figures and numbers was meant to evoke feelings of awe. Baroque churches, showcasing domelike ceilings supported by rows of pillars and framing striking frescoes (which are probably my favorite), complement the Gothic-style Cathedrals in Vienna that are remarkable in their height, stained glass, ornate pulpits and depictions of saints. Regardless of builder or style, however, it is easy to see how places like these are easy to call "sacred."

When I take a step inside an ancient, magnificent cathedral, the world falls away, and a different, almost transcendent moment replaces it. My eyes widen, I stop—and I look up. Great beauty surrounds me; ceilings painted with the stories that the church has clung to for millennia make up a different sort of sky. Gilded altars, carved marble, nuances of light, brilliant colored glass contribute to telling a story—the story of scripture and the story of the church in this place. That history combined into one place almost supplicates the viewer to please stop at the door. Perhaps take off your shoes because something holy has happened here.

As travelers, it is both challenging and astonishingly easy to sit and stare at a piece of a fresco, almost instantly reminded of our own limits and possibilities; to struggle with both a church that has persecuted and a church that seeks to embrace the marginalized. These ornate places offer an invitation to rest our jet-lagged bodies that have walked so many miles, and to celebrate the gifted builders and musicians who have graced this place long before we sang these first two notes. Of course, we'll continue warming up and eventually perform these pieces for an audience, but at nearly every venue we let these two notes sound and fade away before moving on to the other pieces. Here, we are surrounded by beauty and experiencing the greatness of past musicians, builders, rulers, and laypeople. The present choir members are an enraptured audience.

Yet, perhaps the times that the holiness was not as easy to see were the most important and have stayed most securely with me. Seven days of monasteries, cathedrals, and new cities leaves anyone frazzled, and sticking fifty tired college students in one bus and one hotel really means grumbling is inevitable. However, while tiredness and exasperation were certainly present, those spaces were still sacred. Although we forgot the brevity of each moment at times, we still passed Altoids around before concerts, still asked each other how we were doing, and practiced gracious forgiveness for short tempers and hasty words. The holiness was still present to our tired eyes as we got on the bus after that concert, hearing about the Ukrainian opera singer who had thanked us and invited us to her homeland. It was present in the exhausted labor of love, in offering our bodies, voices, and souls to the audience, in singing about hard times—knowing that the places we visited knew more about communal suffering than we could imagine. As images of war, conflict, and imprisonment surrounded us, it was our hope that our offering and presence would bring some type of comfort, a prism of shattered light across the shadowlands.

One of these many moments sticks out because of its proximity to a concert and the extent to which we all realized our own limits. We were all forced to confront the fact that we were exhausted and emotionally unprepared to say goodbye after the next concert, but also that many wanted to be home again, which was also uncertain due to impending Covid tests the next morning. Arguably, this was our best concert of the tour, even coming after a tense period sitting in a dimly lit back room, where a bottle of Ibuprofen was passed around and people waited in line for the single tiny water closet. There was nothing particular grand about this chapel. It was small and had a quaint garden of refuge—a jarringly peaceful place in light of the dusty construction at the front of the church. But though we were on the edge of tears, we filed onto the stage, two by two, and sang despite ourselves. We ended with an encore of “Do Not Be Afraid,” while we wept under the enormity of emotion and the frailty of our bodies. We had interacted with something that was bigger than ourselves. When the concert was over, spent with joy, sorrow, and awe, we embraced one another in the back room. Leaning on one another for support, tears dripping down cheeks, the reality of where we were and what was to come finally came crashing down and settled. The holiness of this place, we realized, may be seen in the architecture but is present in the people.

As we look back on this tour, it may be easier to see the importance of each moment from a distance. But I think we realized even then that something beautiful was happening there. We had the blessing of coming to the end of ourselves, of being exhausted; and that does something wonderful. It brings us to a place with each other and with God where our defenses are down. We are situated in a place to receive.¹

Much of that sacred feeling we experience in each moment is observed when we allow the grace to billow into our lives. One of the ways this happens is through music. As we receive these good gifts—connecting briefly and meaningfully with strangers, participating in places that hold centuries of awe, prayers, and tears, and getting a glimpse of each moment’s transcendence and immanence through music—we had the opportunity to offer a song of response to the Creator of All Beautiful Things and His treasured people. Our song echoes back the grace of God, honoring this place and these people—each lined with holiness.

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1. Smith, Mandy. *Unfettered: Imagining a Childlike Faith beyond the Baggage of Western Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021. The “Rest, Receive, Respond” idea comes from Smith’s book, elaborating on how to experience the grace of God. This theme is used in the final paragraph to explain how grace can be seen in our context.