

Divine Awareness for Tending My Own Garden

Thomas Merton Brightman

It is useful for me to know that others have gone before, so I tell you of this journey as best I can. My words cannot unveil the mystery of surrender. I, the speaker, am no other than the listener. Words cannot reveal the Divine. Silence is the domain of revelation. And so I continue into the second day of my unveiling.

Arriving at Riva San Vitale, in Italian speaking Switzerland known as Ticino, two of us sat at a café in the town center leisurely enjoying conversation and cappuccino. My companion had a book of ancient Christian places of worship. One of these, the Battistero at Riva San Vitale was only a block away. There were no pictures of it, only a floor plan. We finished our gelati and agreed to search it out.

We entered what we believed to be the church, but dates and structure were of more recent vintage. The Battistero is fifth century. Yet I chose to spend time there and take a few photos. One view that I photographed was a close-up of the altar's face which had polished stone symbols of Christ and his five wounds. I still resonate when I see this picture. Little did I know that my focus upon these symbols was but one step from entry into the presence of the Divine.



We walked into the courtyard beside the church and there stood the Battistero, a small and worn building having braved the elements since the fifth century. My friend remarked that these ancient places were often in special energy fields and that physical indicators could be present to mark the boundaries of the sacred space.

We saw none of what we expected to see as markers. Then I noticed five iron grates in the floor of the courtyard. I wondered, could these five grates be positioned symbolically as representative of the wounds of Christ and define the space? Next, I noticed an old hand-dug well from which water had been coursed into the Battistero. The grates seemed connected to an underground water pattern from the well. Then, by chance, I stood on one of the grates to the south of the building.

When I moved off of the grate away from the building, I felt nauseated. Noticing this, I stepped back upon the grate and then toward the building. Great peace came upon me stepping to the inside. True to my name Thomas, I did this three times with the same result. This was my first experience of being in such an energy field. I've heard tales of such, but treated them with silence rooted in skepticism. Now it was real. No longer could I deny.

What appeared to be the original door to the Battistero is no longer available as the steps seemed to have been removed. Continuing around that face of the building to its northern side there was an open door into the inner chamber. Stepping in, I noticed that even the touch of foot to floor echoed throughout. I can only imagine what early church song was like in this domed and masterfully reverberant chamber of worship.

The fresco paintings were barely visible in some sections. Yet, this patchwork of ancestral offerings of art remains inspiring. This unique beauty is a gift of spirit designed to render the transcendent transparent.

I wandered like a child. I was enchanted. I was curious. I was in a safe and enveloping place. I touched and I gazed, in silence. Then came fateful curiosity. I noticed a stone of a different color protruding from under a red carpet reaching from the altar in the apse to the edge of the steps to the huge granite baptismal font. I rolled back the carpet. There was a cross in the floor, its apex pointing to the altar, its foot at the step to baptism.

In childlike excitement, I rushed to my friend to tell of my discovery. She stood looking at it and I walked away for a moment. Then she rushed to me in equal excitement. "Come," she said. "Stand on the cross at its center and tell me what you feel." I stepped out of my shoes and onto the Cross.

I stepped into my future and my past. I now live with knowledge of heart that sees life everlasting. I began to vibrate. Energy coursed through me as the water coursed beneath this temple. My mind began to swim and disappeared. My physical strength dissolved and I fell to the Cross sobbing. I do not know if words exist to tell what follows. I will describe what I can and know the rest.

At some point, I was drawn from the Cross to the life-sized granite font used to baptize early Christians. I crawled to the first step, up the steps, and sat on the lip of the font. The hand of God touched me. My body trembled as never before. I entered the font, bowed on my knees and kissed its center. I stayed prostrate at its center for a long time.

Then, I was called to the Cross. I crawled out of the font, down the steps, and to the apex of the Cross. I was put to the floor as only God can gravitate. I heard a whisper in my ear from my friend. "Go to the altar. They often buried relics under the altar in these places. Just put your hands on its center."

Stumbling, weak-legged and nearly blind from tears, I moved to the altar. I noticed a small cross carved into the edge of its top. I gently, lovingly kissed the cross. Then I noticed what in my

blurred vision looked like three crosses at the center of the top. I kissed them, sensing the salt of my water as the symbols puddled in my tears.

As I raised my head, I put my hands together and slowly lowered them over the crosses to the surface. I raised my head upward to the light that shone through my closed eyes. Christ? The garden? The disciples?

By this time I was so deep into the mystery, that earthly words and orientation to what happened needed to wait until another time. I may never in the life of this earth fully comprehend entering the mystical body of Christ. The blessing leaves me in this world in a way I still struggle to be.

I was in Gethsemane. I could not tell the Christ from me and me from the Christ. One was the other, the other was the One. The suffering of the Passion is beyond words. Tears of blood dripped from my eyes and dissolved into light as they fell. The disciples approached in bowed postures. And, in silence, all was forgiven. There were no words between them in that moment in the garden.

There can be no words in the silence beyond annihilation of self. Only men, however well intended, put words in the mouth of Christ. He spoke not at that moment. Yet, he said all. They knew. I know. The unity of the moment transcended all expression.

My heart was ravished. The gift of tears bestowed. The return to the wilderness eminent. And, now I wander in my knowing with tears as my companion to languish in love with patience. A description of a divine experience cannot explain its secrets. Grace is to God. Joy to the mystery.

When I could, I turned from the altar to face the baptismal font. I shuffled down the carpet toward the Cross, kneeled and then fell prostrate upon it. Much later, as I rose to my knees again, my friend came close to check on me. She is an ordained minister in her faith.

I reached out and took both of her hands. I elevated them and put them upon my head as I kneeled upon the cross in a baptism of desire with her ordination as the symbolic vehicle for me to acknowledge in this time and mind the gift of tears.

I wound up sitting upon one of the designs in the floor to the west side of the Battistero looking east to the altar. I sat in silence.

As I left this sacred space and walked through the courtyard toward the church next door, I said, "God, can this be true?" And the church bell began to toll. So ended this second day. Having been to Gethsemane, I reentered the awareness of this world with a new sense of tending my own garden.

Three years had to pass before I could write about these experiences. I made two more pilgrimages to the Battistero of Riva San Vitale. Each time, I was with different people. Every time I was drawn prostrate to the cross, bathed in my tears.