

54. At Ronchamp

A student came and told me how he had discovered mental prayer. I'll tell you his story. Perhaps it will help you pray to better.

It was at Ronchamp in the church built by Le Corbusier, a unique monument. It is a true creation—something one is rarely tempted to think when viewing a work of art. Deep inside the church on the Epistle side, there is a chapel. Imagine a round tower, 13 feet in diameter and 50 feet high (approximate figures). There is total denudation. The walls are covered with a grayish-white roughcast, uneven and rugged, and unrelieved by any decoration whatsoever. Light comes from above, but the openings through which it enters are invisible. Below, there is semidarkness. Even so, when the eyes gradually turn upward they encounter the intense light of the top of the tower. A diver might well have a similar sensation when he looks up to the surface of the water from a distance of several fathoms below.

In this chapel, more naked than a monk's cell, there is only one object. In the middle, facing you, is an altar made of a large block of stone, devoid of ornamentation and with nothing at all upon it.** The upper surface is slightly larger than the lower one, which gives a sense of upward motion.

Well, my young friend was there, deeply moved by the pervading sense of recollection. In this translucent atmosphere, in this denuded place in which there was nothing to tantalize the imagination, the emotions, or the intellect, he sensed an irresistible invitation emanating from the bare altar. An altar is meant to hold something. It is the table of God, the place where man presents his offerings, where God accepts and consecrates them.

In this poor cell, my friend saw nothing he could present on the altar, except himself. He suddenly understood that God was asking him to offer himself—his intellect, heart, body and liberty—in an act of adoration.

Since that day, when my friend begins his mental prayer he often thinks of that altar waiting for something, waiting for him. And he offers himself. He reflects that the victim on the altar has nothing better to do than to remain there at God's service, as though drawn up by the light from above. His active mental prayer consists in maintaining his soul in this attitude of offering, absorbed in God, beseeching him to accept his "sacrifice of praise."

**Regretfully, since that time a crucifix and sconces have been placed on the altar. The impression one gets is altogether different now.