



Andre Beneteau

Windows on Our Souls: A Spiritual Excavation

On the Beginnings of Christian Art and on the Breakthrough Generation of Early Christians

Peter Larisey, SJ

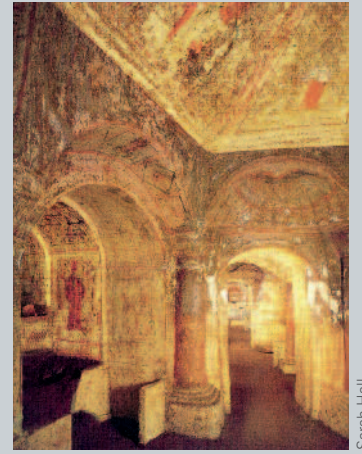
I FOUND VISITING the Catacombs in Rome a fascinating experience, yet I was a bit spooked by the possibility of getting lost. There are hundreds of kilometres of them underneath what once were the outskirts of the ancient city. At several different sites, they were dug out in layers, one seemingly endless network below the other. Each catacomb has its own guides. These are absolutely necessary: one could so easily get lost in the labyrinthine darkness beyond the light from the few electric bulbs. I did lag behind one group I was with in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla, but not out of sight and not for long. A map of the Callistus catacomb reminds me of a spider's web, but a many-layered and unsystematic one.

To begin a catacomb tour, a visitor climbs down some stairs into a tunnel-like gallery and almost immediately senses the cool temperature. You also notice the small, triangular pick-marks left in the damp walls by those diggers — called *fossores* — of nearly two thousand years ago. Their prominence in the culture — they were also painters and managers — reflects the importance the Christian community placed on the obligation to bury the dead.

The Roman catacombs seem very far away from you and me in this already fast-moving twenty-first century. But to search back for them and their images can be



Peter Larlsey



Sarah Hall

Left to right: *Gallery and loculi* in the Catacomb of St. Callistus; *Arcosolium* in the Catacomb of St. Callistus; Ceiling painting in the Catacomb of Priscilla; *Cubiculum* in the Catacomb of Via Latina (all of these catacombs are in Rome)

enjoyable, and, in spite of that, it's also a helpful thing to do. That's because in helping us understand our beginnings, we get to know ourselves and our traditions better. To get our minds to consider them we must swim back through almost twenty rich centuries of Christian history and art. So why bother? One of the main reasons is that it is in the catacombs of the breakthrough generation that we find the very beginnings of Christian art. Our minds are populated with plenty of images from that vast tradition.

Before looking at the importance of the invention of Christian art by the breakthrough generation in those early Roman catacombs, it will be helpful to know something about their context. The vibrant Christian spirituality in the earlier centuries of the Church can be found not in painted or carved images but in the writings of the New Testament — the four Gospels, the Epistles of Paul, James, Peter and others, and the Book of Revelation. This collection, which nourishes us still, was complete around the year 100 CE. A burgeoning Christian spirituality is also embodied in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, who came next. These included Hermas (second century), author of the "Shepherd," and the anonymous "Didache" (first or second century). Each of these included instructions for Christians on how to live. Pope St. Clement of Rome flourished around 96 CE. His First Epistle to the Corinthians deals with questions of stability of the ministry, obedience, and the Eucharist. Early Christian spirituality is especially alive in the Epistles of St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–c. 107 CE). His Epistle to the Romans vibrates with his passionate love of Christ and his desire for martyrdom, which are expressed in powerful, imagistic writing.

Why was such spirituality expressed only in words? Why not in visual imagery? Looking further into the cultural context of the early Christians, I'd like to make a couple of observations. To begin with, the first Christians were Jews. They lived and prayed in the only culture they knew, which was centred in Jerusalem

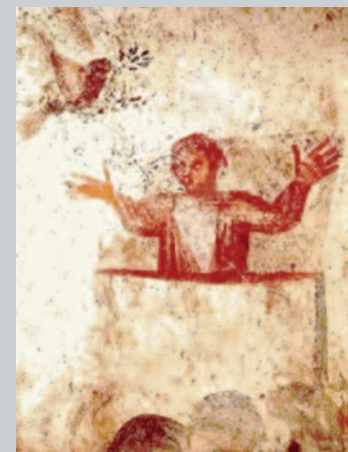
and the Temple. Given this tradition's prohibition of image making, it is not surprising that archeologists have so far found no Christian images or identifiable objects dating from the first Christian century.

What about the second century? Most of its hundred years were free of Christian imagery too. The reasons were different. Paul and the other apostles had been energetic in bringing the Good News of Jesus to the known world of the time, much of which was within the Roman Empire. An interesting document from the year 200 gives us a window on the attitudes of contemporary Christians to surrounding cultures. Written by an unidentified Christian, it was addressed to Diognetus, the Imperial Roman procurator of Egypt:

Christians distinguish themselves from other people not by nationality or by language or by dress. They do not inhabit their own cities or use a special language or practice a life that makes them conspicuous ... They live in Greek and barbarian cities, following the lot that each has chosen, and they conform to indigenous customs in matters of clothing and food and the rest of life.¹

Another illustration of Christian invisibility in Roman culture, by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), is about imagery. In a letter written also around 200, he advised Christians about the kind of image they should have on their signet rings, which were necessary for doing business or signing documents. Clement expects his readers to choose rings from supplies already made, findable on stone-cutters' shelves in any market. Believers were not to create specific Christian imagery. He suggests several possibilities: they could choose an image of a dove, a fish, a ship, a lyre or a ship's anchor. But so could and did the non-Christian majority. Clement lists commonly available signet-ring imagery

Overleaf:
Figure at Prayer,
nave window,
Rose of Lima
Church, Toronto,
ON ↪ 2005e



Sarah Hall

Left to right: *Figure at Prayer*, Domus Ecclesia; *Jesus Blessing the Loaves*, Catacomb of the Jordani of Via Anapo; *Touching the Hem of His Garment* and *Noah Receiving the Dove*, Catacomb of Marcellinus and Peter (all of these catacomb paintings are in Rome)

that should be avoided, such as swords and bows, “since we follow the path of peace,” or drinking cups, “since we are sober.”² In other words, Christians must adapt what is available in the culture that surrounds them, but be both inconspicuous and discriminating in their choices.

Every pagan, Jewish or Christian corpse in Rome had to be buried underground, not in an above-ground monument.³ All burials had to be done outside the city walls, which is why we find the catacomb sites about three to five kilometres from the present city centre. The kilometres of underground burial galleries were possible because the deep soil was a substance called tufa, which is best understood as a soft rock. It was relatively easy to burrow through it, and because the tufa became dry and hard after being excavated, the top or roof of a structure of a single grave would not collapse.

Many of the catacomb sites in Rome are associated with the burial place of a martyr. Thus we have the catacombs of Callistus, killed in 222; of Priscilla, martyred in the first century; of Sebastian, killed during the Diocletian Persecution, which began in 303; of St. Agnes, martyred we don’t know when but long before her basilica was started in 350. Christians of the second century believed it was important to be buried near the martyrs because they could tag along when these proven friends of God would be among the first taken into the Resurrection. However, the Catacomb of Domitilla, begun about 150 and one of the largest in Rome, was named after St. Domitilla, who, the story goes, was a Christian and a niece of the Emperor Domitian (81–96). She was accused of “atheism and Jewish customs” and died in exile near the end of the first century. The catacomb uses her name because she had owned the land under which the first parts of the Catacomb of Domitilla were dug.⁴

Along the walls of an easily excavated gallery, horizontal burial places or loculi were dug out. Sometimes there were



Sarah Hall at work on the Catacomb Window Series

Andre Beneteau

as many as five spaced between floor and ceiling. It is in such individual loculi that ordinary Romans and the poor would be buried. The loculi were often closed with pieces of stone, hardened clay fragments or bricks. Sometimes, if the surviving family had the means, a flat rectangular piece of marble would be used, with identifying information. For the Christians, after about 175, a symbolic picture — e.g., Noah and a dove with an olive branch — might be used. Many of these have been

Catacomb Series:
Noah Receiving the Dove,
nave window,
Rose of Lima Church,
Toronto, ON ✦ 2005e



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saved; I saw a number of them in the Vatican's Pio Christian Museum.

But the catacomb paintings, where do they come from? There are two main types of sites in the catacombs. The smaller would be a sort of an arched niche, called an *arcosolium*, dug into the side of a gallery wall in which several members of a family could be buried. It would, after about 175 CE, be painted with Christian imagery.

The method of painting used in the catacombs was fresco. Thanks to the intact ruins of the first-century town of Pompeii, we know that Roman artists were very skilled in fresco, and their patrons very ambitious. Sometimes most of the interior walls of a home would be covered by colourful painted mythological scenes, imagined architectural divisions or landscapes. Many of these show strong imaginations and pictorial talents at work. Things look quite different in the catacombs: our breakthrough generation used the same technique, producing more modest and less demanding and less expensive work. The tufa in an *arcosolium* would be covered with plaster. While it was still wet, the images were painted or drawn on the wet plaster and so bonded with it.

It is the same basic technique that Michelangelo used between 1508 and 1512, when he was painting the Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The colours used in the catacombs, by contrast, were very limited: usually earth tones like brown and ochre. The lines separating the images are echoes of the imagined architectural divisions in the current Roman tradition of decoration.

But there were also larger sites in the catacombs for imagery. Rich and important families had burial chambers or *cubicula*. These were dug out at right angles to the side of a gallery. In one of these, several generations of a family could be buried in *loculi* cut into walls and floors. The ceilings of such *cubicula* were often shaped as a shallow dome or vault. Along with the walls, these were often painted. Illustrations of Old Testament stories of deliverance were very popular, especially in the earlier sections of Christian catacombs. Among such stories were Noah emerging from the ark, Jesus multiplying the loaves, and Jesus healing the hemorrhaging woman.

The earliest Christian paintings in the Roman catacombs (c. 175–225 CE) are a sign of important changes: the Christian community was aware that it was now a visible group among the



Catacomb Series:
Jesus Blessing the Loaves,
nave window,
Rose of Lima Church,
Toronto, ON ✦ 2005e

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many religious bodies — home-grown Roman religions and those from the East and Egypt — making up the imperial capital. All of these were polytheistic and could, when required, include in their pantheon the Roman emperors. Christians and Jews, however, who were monotheists, would be in trouble on occasions when they would refuse those parts of the civic rituals that required them to worship as a divinity the Emperor or his image. Such refusals often created martyrs. But in spite of these dangerous moments and several serious persecutions, the Christian community was continually growing because, following Christ, they attracted and welcomed not only the learned and the wealthy, but also the uneducated and the poor.

Toward the end of the second century, Christians in Rome were more numerous: a difficult to ignore 50,000 persons. Their visibility is illustrated by the developments in worship spaces. Up to this time, they had been worshipping in the home, called a *titulus*, of a usually wealthy believer. But around the end of the second century, some of these ordinary Roman dwellings were being visibly enlarged to accommodate rapidly increasing numbers. The form of the Eucharistic liturgy was also developing

away from being part of an Agape meal. Now what was needed for the Eucharist was a space with a separate area for the clergy. In this way, the shape of the worshipping space was also changing. Thus the growing presence of the Christians in Rome had become a visible architectural reality. The progression, during this pre-Constantine period of the Church, was from the *titulus*, the Church-House; then, probably after renovations, to the House of the Church; then to the usually rectangular Church Hall. Each of these phases was built onto or over the site of the original *titulus* and, after the freedom of the church in 312 CE and with the patronage of Emperor Constantine (310–337 CE), could be succeeded by a basilica.⁵

The years c. 175 to c. 220 are important dates in the history of Christian art. This is the period when the already richly developing Christian spirituality began to be expressed not just in words but also in architecture and images. Material culture was right in step. It was at this time, for example, that inexpensive, moulded household lamps made of ceramic, bearing Christian clusters of images, were first manufactured for, and distributed and sold to, the emerging Christian market.⁶

Catacomb Series:
Touching the Hem of His Garment,
nave window,
Rose of Lima Church,
Toronto, ON ✦ 2005e



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It is very hard to imagine that there was a time in Christianity when there was no Christian art. We can thank the breakthrough generation for deciding to get it underway. We can also thank the artist Sarah Hall for taking their efforts seriously and then being inspired by these crucial beginnings.

Thinking about the breakthrough generation in earliest Christian art led me to appreciate something important about our artist, Sarah Hall. In her place and time, she too is part of a breakthrough generation. I first came in contact with her art in the early 1980s when I visited an exhibition of Liturgical Arts at Trinity College at the University of Toronto. The only stained-glass window in that exhibition that showed an awareness of the art of the twentieth century was Sarah's triangular Trinity Window created for St. Matthias Anglican Church. Soon after, I was introduced to Sarah and over the intervening three decades, we have had many discussions about her constantly developing work.

Much of her artistic expression is born of the modernist vision of the need to make art that embodies the culture of her own time. To help her accomplish this, she has explored new

developments in stained glass techniques. One of these involves using float glass, which is made by floating liquid glass on molten metal, enabling large areas of smooth and very flat glass to be created. Another uses a technique related to photography.

These processes embody Sarah's breakthrough attitude. She has accomplished the Catacomb Window Series using recent developments in photo-screening and the kiln firing of larger glass pieces, enabling images to be uninterrupted by the use of lead. The lines of the drawings are thus brought from the second or third century catacombs through photographic techniques.

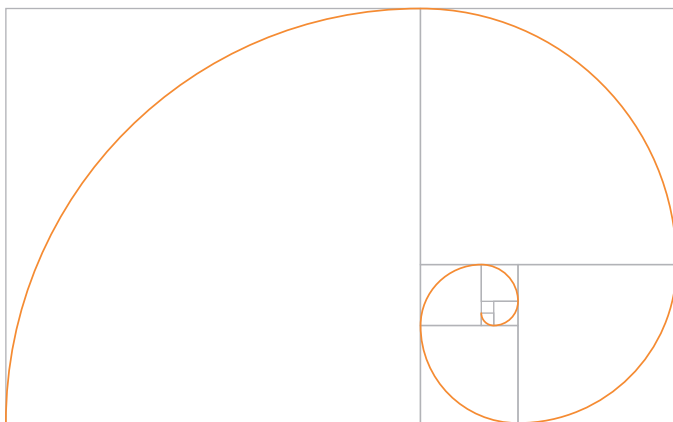
They are then screened onto the glass — a combination of ancient and modern technologies. At this stage, Sarah applied the oxides and enamels to the glass that made, through a series of high-temperature firings in special kilns, the colours she sought. Such kilns, capable of firing at very high temperatures and fusing very large planes of float glass were unimaginable before our time. Thus, in the finished works we become aware of traditions of imagery and meaning that go back to early Christianity at the same time we are conscious of their embodiment in the technologies of our time.



Catacomb Series:
Raising of Lazarus,
 nave window,
 Rose of Lima Church,
 Toronto, ON ✦ 2005e

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In these windows we experience her synthesis of Christian beginnings and contemporary techniques. The early Roman artists themselves presented their images of Jesus — Roman toga-clad — as though from their own time.



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Faculty at U of T, he lectures on the relationship between Religion and Art. Larisey's book on the artistic and spiritual development of Lawren S. Harris, *Light for a Cold Land*, was short listed for the 1994 Governor General's award for non-fiction. At present he is writing a book entitled *The Persistent Spirit: Religion in Modern and Contemporary Art*.

Excerpt from Peter Larisey's forward to *Windows on Our Souls: A Spiritual Excavation* by Sarah Hall and Bob Shantz, 2007, reprinted with permission from Novalis.

1. Anonymous, quoted in Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105.
2. See Finney, 111.
3. Pagans were more likely to cremate their dead and store the ashes in jars or urns and then bury them.
4. See James Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Life and Death in Early Christianity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 27. "Atheism" would mean that she refused to worship the Emperor. Early Christians believed Domitilla was a Christian, but the catacomb is named after her because it was begun about 150 under property she had owned.
5. Archaeology is continually uncovering details of this architectural genealogy of pre-Constantinian Christian buildings by controlled digs under later basilicas. For more information on these fascinating developments, see: L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World. Architectural Adaptation Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Baltimore (MD): Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), esp. 102–148.
6. Paul Corby Finney in *The Invisible God* illustrated one of these on p. 117 and has an engraving of it on p. 119.