Chapter 14

Between Faith and Reason:
New Light on St. Ivo alla Sapienza –
Reflections on a Generative Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

About the church of Sant’ Ivo alla Sapienza, masterpiece of Borromini, it has been said: it was stressed above all its oddness, eccentricity, which critics have always led back to the essence of the Baroque, without examining the possible links that bind their characteristic elements of this building. So, proceeding abduction and venturing to approach sources also apparently alien to each other, it is possible to formulate a thesis: Sant’Ivo is a poem in stone dedicated to Wisdom. Borromini may have scope to create a consideration of Dante’s Divine Comedy, and specifically the third poem dedicated to Paradise and to meet God; and at the same time to draw up a formal summary of the binomial reason / faith, so long discussed the dawn of Christianity. The survey chase the poetic and literary references, and found correspondence with indisputable texts of Dionysius the Areopagite, Dante and Boethius. A thesis deeply innovative than the critical pre-existing, that opens new research and an integral vision of this highly consistent “bizarre” building.

BORROMINI AND HIS TIMES

Spiritual life, of which art is a fundamental component, proves to be an ascending and progressive movement, as complex as it is clear and precise. It is the movement of conscience (Kandinsky, 1989, p. 21).

Between the year 1632 – when the project was launched – and 1660 when Pope Alexander VII consecrated the church – Francesco Borromini dedicated himself to the realization of a gigantic cosmogony of the St. Ivo. He sought to represent systematically and in strongly iconic idiom the harmonious structure of the universe as conceived by the infinite intelligence of the Creator. The construction started in 1642, only a few months after Galileo’s demise and approximately ten years after the punishment imposed on him for having questioned the geocentric system and the entire divine creation. The building went on for almost twenty years taking advantage of the propitious cultural climate of the first half of the seventeenth

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century to which Benedetto Croce attributed a certain moral decline (Croce, 1946, pp. 41-43). These were undoubtedly difficult years troubled by pestilence and famine, which must have had a profound influence on Borromini’s creative mind. Another source of influence that cannot be undervalued was the philosophy of Galileo, which – although the Inquisition constrained him to abjure it radically dismantled the comfortable image of the universe placing “the divine plan at a distance not to be quantified by any human measure” (Garin, 1980, p. 168).

It was a veritable “overturning” of mentality, which – would not have been possible without a certain cultural and psychological openness to the innovative developments of science, Borromini’s “Cusanian” attitude notwithstanding (Gottardo & Portoghesi, 2006, pp. 133-135).

In this climate the construction of a temple to celebrate the conception of science which could balance Faith and Reason seems an immense challenge. Thus – in the words of Portoghesi – in uncertain hesitation “between his ardent faith or the vein of doubt, or secret stoicism that later led him to sensational suicide” Borromini called upon God himself as the supreme prompter of his design (Gottardo & Portoghesi, 2006, pp. 150).

The edifice he conceived – both internally and externally – put forth a vision of Creation divided according to the still medieval idea into three fundamental parts: earth, heaven and the Empyrean. It is as if his mind had placed in a single design the whole of the known cosmos indicating the path of Knowledge to be the only possible way of uniting with God. It was neither an oddity or an extravagance.

St. Ivo seems to express all the moral and creative tension of the imaginative and visionary spirit seeking to represent the whole world as known so far. The church, therefore, is the consequence of a juxtaposition, or better still, of the connection between spaces in which they are discerned: the Empyrean in the highest vault; the celestial vault with the representation of the nine heavens (the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, heaven of fixed stars, crystalline Heaven or First Mover) immediately lower; ecclesiastical hierarchies and the world of man – in the lowest part. According to Arnaldo Bruschi, who intuited the revolutionary load of St. Ivo, this particular elaboration of isolated themes is a common feature of many Borromini’s works. For him the emerging spaces of the building strike one as closed within themselves, autonomous, scarcely prepared to relate to their context: “He seems to have been able to express himself only through phrases, sentences, isolated words: fragments of a dead language he struggled to re-semantize it by isolating them” (Bruschi, 1999, p. 27).

SEVERINUS BOETHIUS, PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, DANTE ALIGHIERI: THREE POSSIBLE REFERENCES

Even though our knowledge of the famous library of Francesco Borromini (Portoghesi, 2014) is still rather limited, we are quite cognizant of his vast interests in culture. In my opinion, we can legitimately indicate three possible sources of inspiration for the architecture of St. Ivo, three texts fundamental for medieval theological culture and philosophy: Severinus Boethius’ De consolatione philosophiae, De coelesti hierarchia of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy. Let me review them individually.

In De consolatione philosophiae written around 524 A.D. Boethius enquires into the nature of good and evil, into the structure of knowledge as well as into the intellectual itinerary that elevates man from his purely material condition of the knowledge of God. He puts forward a compelling correspondence between architectonic details of the exterior of the cupola and some elements of the sumptuous robe
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