

Journey of light: LA's Our Lady of the Angels

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [August 8, 2012](#) issue



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On a flight home from Los Angeles last year, I sat next to a young professor of landscape architecture who had just visited the city's new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. We discussed sacred architecture all the way to the East Coast, and he encouraged me to see the cathedral when I could. On my latest trip to Los Angeles I had a free day and decided to take my prayers to Our Lady of the Angels.

My prayers consisted of motherly things—intense and helpless worry, guarded gratitude, and concerns about my own work. I know I can pray at my desk, or in the convent chapel, or in my own garden with a cup of tea. But architecture shapes prayer and opens you to new ways of seeing and listening. It's easier to pray in prayed-in places. I know I can expect to be changed in a sacred place.

Entering the lower plaza through the Shepherd's Gate from a busy street in downtown Los Angeles, I find an oasis of generous outdoor spaces with fountains, palm trees, flowers and a grove of olive trees shading a grassy play area with remarkable animal statues waiting for a child's imagination. The fountain nearest the entrance reminds me (carved in 36 languages) that "I shall give you living water." I'm already enchanted. In just a few steps I'm in liminal space in the midst of a concrete city.

My next surprise comes at the threshold of the cathedral itself. Instead of the traditional Last Judgment in a tympanum over the portal, there's an approachable, very young, starkly elegant peasant Mary in a pose of both prayer and welcoming. She reminds me of the joke about Peter at the pearly gates complaining to Jesus that he keeps seeing the poor souls he's sent away appearing in heaven behind him. "Oh, it's my mother," says Jesus. "She lets them in the back door." No judgment. Just a young girl, arms open, eyes closed in prayer. Our Lady sets the tone for my praying, especially my motherly concerns. She stands upon a crescent moon, evoking the woman in Revelation 12:1, and she is clothed with the sun through her halo, which is empty space opening to the sky in a circle above her. Everything about the cathedral has to do with light.

Once inside, I find another surprise: no visible sanctuary. Instead, this church offers a long, inclined, blissfully uncluttered transitioning space the length of the cathedral. I need every bit of that empty space. I feel as if I'm floating upward, and, gently rounding the corner at the top, I find one more surprise: a fountain for full-immersion baptism, the water running into the pool from the four corners of upper pools. Twice, water invites me to stop and touch and remember who I am and to whom I belong.



The baptistry is in the cathedral's

highest place, and the sanctuary, now visible, is far below. The incline I've ascended brings me here, and as I turn around the nave draws me down again toward the action of the public worship space. And light! Instead of windows or stained glass, alabaster panels cool the southern California sunlight, and the constantly changing light evokes divine presence.

I am not alone. Many people mill around quietly or sit in the pews. I've noticed this about downtown Roman Catholic churches around the world: people come to pray. I take the hint—although anxiety isolates, my worries are not unique. Both humbled and exalted, I know I'll take my humanity into my prayer. I notice, too, that the nave offers *real rest*, nearly unattainable in the increasingly distracting cyber world.

Not only people praying, but a great cloud of witnesses draw me through the nave toward the altar area. Gorgeous tapestries along the walls place me within the communion of saints both famous and anonymous, of every race and age, unidealized, all facing the altar. Although digitalized from photographs of real people, the fabric matches the walls and evokes frescoes, muted and patched. I wanted to sit with them, and I did. All of us sitting in this nave are saints. Finally I let them draw me toward the altar area.



No choir area or grail or rood screen or

iconostasis separates the altar from the people. (The altar is ten square feet of burgundy marble.) Rather, people go and touch it, the guides invite you to sit in the bishop's chair, and people come up to kiss the dark bronze Toparovsky sculpture of the suffering Christ on a cross. Seats fan out in four sections around the altar, not counting the nave. The sense, architecturally at least, is that we all belong around the altar, up close, together, equal.

When you pray here you are part of humanity past, future and in the inglorious, unromanticized present. Conspicuously hidden, as the architect intended, the niches for private devotion fan out behind the public worship space. I brought my prayers to these beautiful and evocative chapels. But without the transitioning journey, reclaiming my baptismal identity and my humbled humanity, my prayers might have been more self-involved and narrow. Instead, I took a journey of light, guided toward a wideness of soul I hope for when I pray.