The Geometry of Love, by Margaret Visser

reviewed by Sally Cunneen in the January 2, 2002 issue

The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church. By Margaret Visser. North Point Press, 323 pp., $27.00.

Margaret Visser's remarkable book is something to savor and reread. At first glance, it seems simply a guide for serious visitors to the ancient Roman church of St. Agnes Outside the Walls, which has been open to worshipers for 1,350 years. But as René Girard observes, her visit "is the experience that all of us tourists dream about and never achieve." Visser expertly uses the knowledge made available by modern methods of historical research but transfigures it, "bringing tourism back to its lost origins in Christian pilgrimage."

Visser's training as a professor of classics and an anthropologist of everyday things--her two previous books explored the importance of dinner and its rituals--make her an ideal tutor. Like the Henry Adams of *Mont St. Michel and Chartres*, she never talks down to the reader. After walking us through St. Agnes from narthex to apse and altar, she takes us down to the silver casket in the catacomb into which the church was built, a casket that holds the remains of Agnes, the young martyr buried there in 305. At every step she explains terms without pedantry, and describes the materials, functions and multiple meanings of each object she encounters. Yet, despite Visser's descriptive skills, the publisher must be faulted for failing to include pictures of the church.

Many readers will already know that the main path to the altar in any church is called the "nave," a word that means "ship." But how many know that the "aisles" on the sides are named after the Latin word for "wings," recalling to ancient Romans the rising and dipping of oars on the side of a ship, propelling it forward? To landlubbers, St. Agnes's wide nave and magnificent columns suggest a tree-lined avenue:

> The distance covered endures even as the travellers press onward, just as a road or a route on a map exists both before and after the trip. The "end"-the apse-is in view from the beginning. The church contains both the road and the movement upon it. In a Christian temple, the past is never to be forgotten or disowned or discounted: it is part of each person, as it is part of the Church and also part of what this building expresses. In a church the future is always open, while the past is never shut off.

Visser vividly describes the magnificent mosaic in the apse--of a grownup Agnes flanked by two (smaller) popes against a golden background signifying eternity. We learn how mosaics were made, the symbolic significance of pomegranates and seeds (the blood of the martyrs was understood as the seed of the church) and that the number 8, halfway between a circle and a square, was a common symbol of the resurrection. We learn about the catacombs and Christian burial customs, about the celebration of the death day of martyrs as their birthday, their entry into new life--a reversal of the Greco-Roman concept that the dead polluted the living.

Visser makes clear how Christian thinking and this church, though steeped in Greco-Roman culture, nevertheless contradict the latter's insistence on fate. Christian meaning is rooted instead in the history and beliefs of Judaism. The altar and tabernacle recall the Ark of the Covenant and its portable tent shrine, carried by the people wherever they went, and the "journey to liberation is still the theme, the story of the Jewish Exodus the founding pattern" of Christianity.

Visser's anthropological awareness prevents her from being blinded by contemporary cultural taste. She is able to discuss religious art for its religious qualities, knowing that, as art, some is excellent and some is dreadful. She can even make the ancient popularity of relics or the later sentimental devotions to the Sacred Heart plausible within a religion that is profoundly bodily as well as spiritual. Good taste, she warns, can be even more of an idol than any depiction of Jesus or a saint. Her clarity and lack of defensiveness in explaining some of Catholicism's odd or exotic rituals can lower barriers between believers and their secular friends.

Yet she suggests that some revered customs within Christianity may themselves be idols. After telling us that the *passios*, the official hagiographical stories of the many other young female martyrs like Agnes, stress their virginity, Visser points out that we know from other sources that most were put in brothels and undoubtedly raped. By denying this, the church has made them pagan rather than Christian heroes,

since violation and victimization can be the glory of Jesus' followers.

Visser's ability to read the spatial relationships within the church is itself an epiphany supporting her belief that "the church as a spatial entity represents the mystery that one day we shall discover that the beginning and the end of time, Alpha and Omega, are one." The main altar stands directly above the martyr's tomb; it supports the tabernacle containing the Eucharist, and arching over it is the glittering figure of the mosaic and above that the church tower pointing to the heavens. "The architectural disposition of the church building is itself designed to express . . . the experience of 'rising again,' which is the consequence of a 'leap of faith.'"

Like the church it describes, Visser's *The Geometry of Love* is a clear-eyed, generous introduction to Christianity as it has existed in time and aspires to eternity.