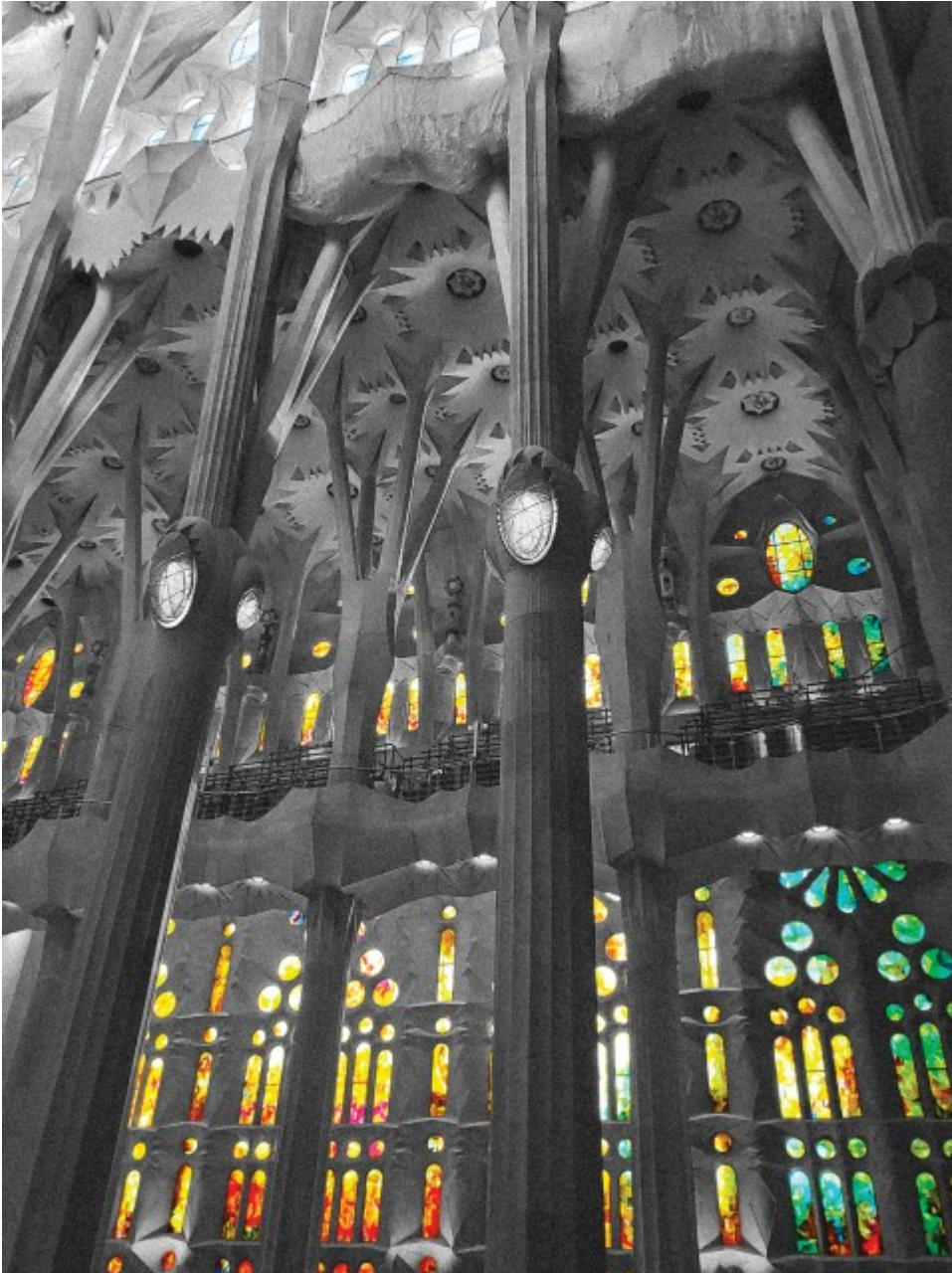


Feeling God in a modernist cathedral-in-progress

While other churches have filled me with wonder, Barcelona's Sagrada Familia brought tears to my eyes.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

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(Century illustration)

On our first day in Barcelona, we went to Sagrada Familia. We walked there from the hotel, waking up earlier than my jet-lagged self would have liked, and around every corner and down every street I expected to see it. From the plane, it seemed like the church towers over the city, the center point to which the whole thing flows. And yet, once we were down within the leafy warren of city streets, we didn't see the church until we turned the corner into the plaza where it sits, surrounded by construction cranes and mobs of tourists.

If you're not familiar, Sagrada Familia is the largest unfinished Catholic church in the world, designed by Catalan modernist architect Antoni Gaudi. Gaudi was a lover of sinuous curves, rococo details, and bright, colorful mosaics, and all these are reflected in his masterpiece. The church has been under construction for more than 100 years, starting and stopping with wars and pandemics, and is now probably less than a decade from completion. The last several years, in particular, have been a time of staggering growth: I went once as a kid, some 20 years ago, and my main impressions were of a place that was gray and somewhat dingy—full of scaffolding and concrete bags and the detritus of workers. That wasn't the church I walked into this April.

The walk over had been gorgeous—utterly cloudless, the spring we had been chasing in Chicago in full swing across the Atlantic. After the indignities of passing through security amid crowds of other tourists, the slight maze of trying to figure out how to actually get into the door we wanted, we walked through a huge door, and suddenly there it was, full of light.

I've been in all kinds of historic churches, from New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral and St. John the Divine to Paris's Notre Dame to Mexico City's Metropolitan Cathedral and dozens of smaller, glorious temples in between. I love a rosette window, a towering column, a stone flourish tucked away in some unseen nave. There's something both understandable and mysterious about an old church: yes, there is an architectural language they have in common, a kind of grandiosity you look at and say, "Ah, God lives here," but it's also nearly incomprehensible. How many of us know a stone carver, an architect of flying buttresses, a designer of stained-glass windows? How do we understand the kind of infrastructure and knowledge and devotion needed to raise up thousands of feet of stone dedicated to God? Seeing a Gothic or neo-Gothic church is majestic, but its majesty is written in a language of the past.

Walking into Sagrada Familia, there's no mistaking it for anything but a modern cathedral, a cathedral-in-progress. Sunlight streams through stained glass that looks watercolored and abstract, leaving pools of colored light on the ground that render one side of the nave in greens and blues, the other in reds and yellows, the stone bright white and unaged by centuries of candle smoke. The shapes inside might be mycelia, or a sci-fi spaceship, or grains of pollen under a microscope—the architecture takes and rearranges the natural world into new forms, so we can truly understand their glory. This is, of course, not much different than what any ancient church has done—a play on light and leaves and majesty, re-creating creation that we might understand it better. And yet, while other churches have made me gasp and wonder, stepping into Sagrada Familia brought tears to my eyes.

I'm still trying to tease out the reasons for this response, but I think at least part of it comes with the museum that occupies some of the side rooms of the cathedral. In it, you'll find not only the plans and maquettes that survived a fire set by anarchists at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, scale models and artist's renderings and little snippets of history from the 120 years of construction, but also the sketches and tools and materials for the hundreds of workers and artisans who have created the church—from the watercolor and black construction paper sketches for the stained-glass windows, to stone carvers' rasps, to tile samples for the mosaics that crown the towers. It showed that this cathedral was the work of people, ordinary humans who had learned to make things with their hands and minds and bodies—skills that had been passed from one human to another from the days of those oldest churches until now and art that will last for as long as this church does.

There's a quote from Annie Dillard I turn to a lot. In *For the Time Being*, she writes that "there is no less holiness at this time—as you are reading this—than there was on the day the Red Sea parted. . . . In any instant the sacred may wipe you with its finger." I come back to this quote because I don't quite believe it, but I hope for it—hope for the feeling of a living God in the world. The feeling is few and far between, but every now and then you walk under a cathedral's vaulted, brand-new ceilings on a sunny day, and the feeling comes. God, not in a language of the past, not in a way that feels like it needs interpretation, but alive and streaming with light on the first morning of vacation.