

Unfinished business (Philippians 1:3-11)

Paul challenges us to consider what really matters.

by [Catherine Healy](#)

December 6, 2024

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

In 1882, Barcelona's Catholic bishop laid the cornerstone for the historic Basilica of the Holy Family, best known by its Spanish name: Sagrada Familia. The next year, architect Antoni Gaudi took over the project. Still at the beginning of his brilliant career, Gaudi was determined to build a church unlike anything the world had ever seen. He threw out the original neo-Gothic blueprints and let his imagination run wild.

Sagrada Familia boasts mosaic pinnacles straight out of a fairy tale; soaring stone columns carved as tree branches, creating an indoor forest; and rainbows of stained glass, carefully angled to refract the sun into a "temple of light." The basilica is now a popular tourist destination and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is well-known around the world for its beauty, but even better known for a somewhat less glamorous fact: due to ongoing bureaucracy and funding challenges, its construction remains unfinished after 142 years.

Like so many visionaries, Gaudi died before his greatest work was complete. What is astonishing about Sagrada Familia, however, is that generations of its builders and architects have died without seeing their work complete.

When Paul writes from prison to the fledgling church at Philippi, he knows that the believers there are waiting eagerly for the second coming of Jesus, the moment foretold by John the Baptist when “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6, from Isaiah 40:5). Some of the Philippians are growing fearful that they may die before Jesus descends in glory. To them, Paul offers a promise: “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” God is the one who begins all good works in us, and God is the one who will continue working to complete what we have started, even if we don’t live long enough to see the result.

Paul closes this section of his letter with a fervent prayer that the Philippians might be blessed with the insight “to determine what really matters.” And what really matters, in the end, is not that we complete every project but that we build faithfully upon the good works that God has begun. Whether we are raising children, creating artistic masterpieces, or building a professional legacy (or maybe all three!), every one of us will one day leave behind work that must be carried on by others and trusted to God. When we accept this reality, we can lean into what really matters and use our gifts well during this finite but beautiful earthly life.