

FRANCIS MESLET

ABANDONED CHURCHES

UNCLAIMED PLACES OF WORSHIP

JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

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*« A building is self-sufficient; it is both the tragedy and the setting of the tragedy,
the place of dialogue between the human will still engraved in these enormous stoneworks,
motionless mineral energy, and the irrevocability of Time. »*

Memoirs of Hadrian - Marguerite Yourcenar



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Preface

How many of these churches and chapels have fallen fast asleep under the dust of time? The only visitors they welcome are the few curious and lost, who with eyes wide open discover places once full of life. Abandoned? Forgotten? Victims of ingratitude? Have they fallen into the vulgar domain of disposable consumption? Like urban wastelands they are testament to a time not so long ago that shaped the world we know today; they were filled with life by men and women just like us; they were home to the whispers of prayers and the joys of religious songs; both large and small, they welcomed men and women brought together by simple faith. For those faithful followers, these shelters appeared unmovable and indestructible; their children and grandchildren would continue to invest in these places of worship. Religious practice seemed natural and made to last as long as humankind walked the Earth.

Alas, everything comes from dust and everything returns to dust. It is after all one of the teachings of Christianity — have we forgotten that? And so here are the churches, chapels, priories, and oratories, fast asleep in the folds of the passing years. Time runs its course, unwavering, insensitive and indifferent. Wind and rain gnaw at the roofs, walls and windows. The stained glass cracks and nature continues its inhumation. First come the layers of dead leaves, lichen, and moss; then the grass starts to grow and rodents and insects arrive. Little by little, dust accumulates and spiders spin their webs, setting the scene of abandonment. These buildings often cut a sorry figure when compared to cathedrals and imposing basilicas, but they deserve more than just a jaded, disenchanted glance. Entering these places stirs up a strange mix of feelings: nostalgia, horror and sadness intertwine with memories and even regrets. You who enter here, do not lose all hope; churches should not merely be looked at. They need to be observed, absorbed, so they can reveal to us their secrets. Looking beyond the appearance to discover their history and their initial purpose brings them to life in our minds and our hearts; it unveils their glory, their simplicity, and their hidden treasures. They are not ruins, but relics. And we can imagine them enlivened by candlelight and the breath of the faithful.

We can envision the builders, the loud-mouthed masons, the sculptors, painters, bronze smiths, glaziers, and all those busy decorating these structures coming back to life for a brief instant. The frozen statues hold their breath until they hear our footsteps edging towards them. And they feel an unknown hand lay a few wild flowers at their feet. The rubble that clutters the floor, the ravaged furniture, and the dull walls invite us to indulge in a moment of meditation and humility. These places reflect our weaknesses, and all too often they include the feelings of ungratefulness and carelessness that afflict us all. Yet they also open for us the doors of time and infinity, and confirm our ability to overcome these feelings. That is the biggest glory of these neglected places. The forgotten churches and chapels pursue the destiny that their builders had promised them: to be the vessels of souls. And even if the last stones that constitute them are buried under the earth, they will forever remain what they really were: places of humility and faith built by humankind for humankind.

Our century does not care. The most fortunate churches sometimes regain their initial purpose, but they are the rare few. Some are turned into shops and spaces dedicated to all sorts of activities, while the rest are destined to be struck by pickaxe, without consideration for their history or architectural value. So many of these churches were built, destroyed, and restored throughout Europe that it seems

nearly impossible to save them all. None seem to be spared; all are affected by the leprosy that has infected our century. Every style, every era is affected. The shadows of neglect grow bigger with the disaffection of places of worship. That is their great misery and the great poverty of our times.

Francis Meslet's book is an unparalleled testimony to these places. He brings us rare and touching images of our history, our beliefs, our hopes, and our fears. This is an invitation to dream. Each photograph is not only an image in time, every single picture is a guide book, to which we hold the keys deep within us. It is up to us to turn the pages and let ourselves be led by our imagination on a journey through the centuries, while soaking up the poetry and simple beauty of these places roused from their great slumber.

Christian Montesinos



< No fixed devotion

I need You

A nave without a pilot / 13th-century chapel, Italy, Piedmont region

"In this deserted, solitary and vast asylum, I hear nothing . . . To whatever side I turn my eyes, the objects that surround me tell of an end, and teach me resignation to my own end." Diderot.

Generations have probed the supernatural in the visible spaces of churches, cathedrals, monasteries, or convents. And artists competed to create, through beauty, the very reflection of the mysteries of an ethereal kingdom. Architecture, paintings, tapestries, stained glass windows, statues appeared like a vision before the believers. Extraordinary achievements, a triumph of styles! Symbols and attributes, figures of theology, vices and virtues were as striking as the light shining in the darkness. Symmetry, harmony in the designs of the buildings, power and simplicity, storytelling, composition in the statues and paintings: the bodies appeared under the draperies of stone or paint, figures seemed noble and alive, the altarpieces opened onto transfigurations. Here, all that remains of this theatricality are the solid sections and sculpted lacework of a plundered décor, a door closed on a past of sacristy, a silent confessional, an empty pulpit, and a few eternally youthful cherubs. Where are the faithful, alive and warm in their fancy Sunday attire and silk gloves? Can their voices still be heard, celestial and tenacious, floating in the air around the sturdy solidity of the altars, columns, vaults? For those who have faith, what a frightful sight to see today this nave without a pilot, without sailors, without passengers for the afterlife!

Lilyane Beauquel





< Sacred for sure



Déjà vu



An outcast of society



The field of possibilities



Watch your back

I saw the light >

Eternally waiting

16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th-century church, France, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region

A hieratic, impassive saint gazes fixedly to the sky holding a sword, instrument of passion or struggle, and the palm leaf, that heaven grants her. Is the king her servant or her assassin?

And is the woman at his right his wife? No, these are three holy figures as the pedestals and niches show. Saint Catherine of Alexandria at the king's side.

Eternally waiting, they call out to the rare guest who falls upon this place, which is now only visited by bygone memories. Against a sky-blue background dotted with crosses, the three abandoned statues await the resurrection of a forgotten church.

The statuary, which at first sight was thought to be made of beautifully carved stone, is only plaster, as evidenced by the pedestal on the left and its gaping wound. This late 19th-century creation probably deserved more than being abandoned like this. Of course, this commissioned statuary, made in a factory, is not prestigious. There is no illustrious signature on the base. Is that why it is worth no interest? A whole world is slowly disappearing, despised because it is too close to us, as if architectural and statuary youth were a defect. One day soon the nasty teeth of a mechanical shovel will turn our three statues to rubble. Perhaps a worker will take one last look at these sculptures. Will he make a plea to the Virgin to be forgiven?

How many statues, left out in the freezing cold of empty naves, will join them? This is the great misery of what was the pride of the 19th century in France: in less than a century, more churches and chapels were built than in all the previous centuries. When one of these constructions disappears, it is a small piece of our history that falls into oblivion. Each of these statues tells us a story and bears witness to the beliefs and veneration of a century. Each one was, in its time, venerated, and let us rest assured, the women of the people came to lay flowers at their feet.

Christian Montesinos





Since I've been holding the candle



We loved each other so much



Mass for the present state



Patience

The Saints of Fayence

13th, 14th, 16th, and 19th-century church, France, Nouvelle-Aquitaine region

The faithful left after the service and never came back. Did they know it was the last Mass? Everything still seems to be perfectly in order. The tired wood and straw chairs maintain their position as best they can, barely shaken by the memory of the buttocks that have risen from them. With their proud backs, and of three or four different models, some seem to be listening attentively to a neighbour, while others have set themselves apart, hinting at a deserted central aisle. On the uneven floor, pinkish paving stones resist the dust, and in some corners they resist the piles of dried guano. On the right, a tired organ with loose pedals calls for the fingers of a sanctimonious music lover to burble out his favourite hymn. On the left, the milky grey wooden pulpit tries to make a good impression, hoping for a stunt priest to take a chance on it. Two makeshift poles hold it up, just enough to keep up appearances. The choir is wide and high, accentuating the feeling of heavy emptiness. Large windows with unsophisticated stained glass let in a generous light that seems to put everyone in agreement. High up, four statues clinging to their stelae look at each other like porcelain saints. Joan of Arc has turned blond with the sun; it must be said that it is scorching around here. Saint Martin preferred to keep his coat on to protect himself from the celestial ablutions. In desperation, Saint Rita tightens her black veil around her hair. Without a doubt, the pigeons seem to have a passion for the Christ; of all the perches available in the choir, it is on the divine head that they prefer to come and meditate. Many of them have found peace and relief there.

Francis Meslet

A waltz in three quarter time >





< Combining the useless with the unpleasant

To dust you shall return

Sweetheart, let's see who's watering you >

If I had to do it all over again

15th, 16th, and 19th-century cloister, Occitanie region

"If the site of a ruin seems perilous, I shudder. If I feel safe and secure there, I'm freer, more alone, more myself, closer to myself. It's there that I miss my friend." Diderot.

A cloister. The background of an ageing forest. The tiles are neatly arranged, supporting beams, the cross has been picked up, wild grass grows in the garden. Every place is the place of a projection, in an image, an infinity of images, including this one: a candid place without ringing bells or silent prayers, where possibility and impatience, desire and tenderness, birth and end, resurface. Nothing is more precious than this moment, this image and the dream that it begins again. To hell with ulterior motives, petty strategy. To hell with the pure and the impure! Do not lose your only chance. Enter this room under the sky with consciousness in the place that says yes, yes to the other, yes to love.

"One moment to dawdle, a lifetime to regret!" (Jankeleevich). What would these charming stones and greenery be without your breath, without your lovers' eyes, without your hands and mouth looking for each other? This is a place of pleasure, of miraculous simultaneity, and of lucky reciprocity between body and soul. Your silhouettes against a column, lying in the aisle, mingled and united. So many times! Your wonderful youth!

Lilyane Beauquel





< How ardent I was



No need for explanations



Window on choir

Simple souls' finale / Late 19th-century chapel and crypt, *Italy, Liguria region*

I did not imagine I would find a chapel enshrouded with such light when I crept into the bowels of the crypt. Past the rusty but still sharp gates, the brambles and hostile vegetation surrounding the mausoleum, the tiny staircase hidden behind a door sealed shut by time, I finally arrived in the apse, just behind a finely chiselled white marble altar. With a distinctive metallic squeaking noise, I painfully pushed the gate that separated me from the choir. I took a step onto the dusty but richly paved floor. The contrast between the narrowness and the height of the place was striking. I guess this mausoleum was built in memory of a woman; her bust sat proudly on the right side of the tiny nave, just under a stained glass window flooded with sunlight. I walked closer to the face to observe its features. Because of the sun shining behind it, I had to squint my eyes several times to capture all the details. Isn't there a saying that an aged face is weathered by time? The look was peaceful, the features serene and the bosom ample . . . the marble hadn't aged a bit. This contrasted sharply with the state of the base, whose leather trim had not withstood the test of time and revealed a rustic, rough block of wood. I then placed myself in front of the altar. My back to the locked entrance door, my eyes contemplated the work of light. It was a Gothic chapel made up of pointed arches: an ode to verticality down to the smallest plant motifs. Time had done its work, erasing in an anarchic way the paintings, uncovering the plaster and sometimes the marble in an unexpected pictorial dialogue. Will I come back here one day before everything has been erased?

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Between 2012 and 2019 Francis Meslet photographed several hundred places of worship across Europe. Over time, these places have become enveloped in silence, the only thing heard there now an occasional gust of wind whistling through broken stained glass, or the rhythmic drip of water leaking through the dilapidated roof above a nave. Nevertheless, these muted places still draw an occasional visitor. Once upon a time, prayers could be heard recited in Latin in a German church; and in a French Catholic college, the voices of children once resounded to the sound of the bells. But who can imagine what sounds might be concealed behind the walls of a crypt in the heart of the Italian mountains, or within a tomb in a former convent in Portugal?

In his spare time Francis travels the world in search of places that have fallen into disuse - religious buildings where time has stood still since their doors were closed for the last time. He returns with incredible photographs, each a time capsule, a record of a parallel universe. They prompt us to let our imaginations wander and ask ourselves questions. With the greatest respect for the faithful who regularly visited them long ago, he offers us an opportunity to immerse ourselves in places that have been abandoned by faith, to seek a divine light.

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