

Recovering the Light of the Divine. The Sanctuary of the Madre de Deus Convent.

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Introduction

One of the pivotal areas of religious life in the Madre de Deus Convent, a Clarisse nun house funded in 1509 by Queen Leonor of Avis (1481-1525), was the Choir. When the Queen decided to build a convent in this place, a seer told her that she had had a vision: from the Choir of the future house there would be a ladder which would conducted the nuns directly to Paradise. The actual Choir architecture corresponds to a



Figure 1 – Reliquary chest containing a large number of relics of the 40 Martyrs from Morocco.

second housing concluded during the period when M.e Soror Joana da Piedade (?-1682) was Abbess. It has been constructed as a jewelry box, a concept fit to a place that would be also called “The treasure room”. The referred “treasure” was a large collection of relics, many of them placed in sculptures, such as the still existing 45 busts dated from the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries, representing the saints whose relics were kept inside them.



Figure 2 – West side of the choir at aprox. 10 a.m.



Figure 3 – North side of the choir at aprox. 12 p.m.



Figure 4 – East side of the choir at aprox. 10 a.m.

Reflections

The unusual setting of the reliquaries placed as if they were in assembly, surrounding the nuns in the Choir, was emphasized by a masterly use of light. When reading the memories of these women, a recurrent reference to light, being this real or mystical in appearance, can be observed. Among the ones that were revered to be a gifted keeper of the light in the Choir was M.e Soror Isabel do Calvário (1596-1662) from whom it was said that “she was always giving support and fixing the lamps for permanently maintaining the light to the Consecrated Sacrament, the holy relics and the pious images that are worshiped in this place” [1].

From M.e Soror Joana da Trindade (1651-1694) there are reports that during a powerful thunderstorm she “prayed and floated high in the air to the Sacarium singing the Te Deum Laudamus hymn and before it was concluded a powerful lightning illuminated the place and everything became quiet” [1].

This concentration of events in a single space seemed to be compelling due to a combination of aspects: The structure of the architecture as a jewelry box; The use of gold which reflects the light, providing a “truth for the spirit that was a truth for the eyes” [2]; The position of the windows, following the movement of the sun in the six key moments of the celebration [Matins (at sunrise), Lauds (morning), Terce (9 a.m.) (Figures 2, 4), Sext (12 p.m.) (Figures 3, 6) None (3 p.m.) (Figures 5, 7) and Vespers (at dusk)] which favored sensitive experiences in the minds of the nuns.



Figure 5 – West side of the choir at aprox. 15 p.m.



Figure 6 – South side of the choir at aprox. 12 p.m.



Figure 7 – East side of the choir at aprox. 15 p.m.

The theatrical use of the sunlight assumed a new meaning because reflected on the key elements placed in the room: reliquaries and Sacarium. All these elements allow the understanding of the narratives of miracles and visions occurred in this place and the psychosomatic inclination these women felt when they were praying in the room. The almost theatrical concentration of the sunlight beams and the belief in the power of the physical presence of many saints helped to believe that this was a holy ground. The gilded niches (Figure 8) where the relics were placed helped to create an almost

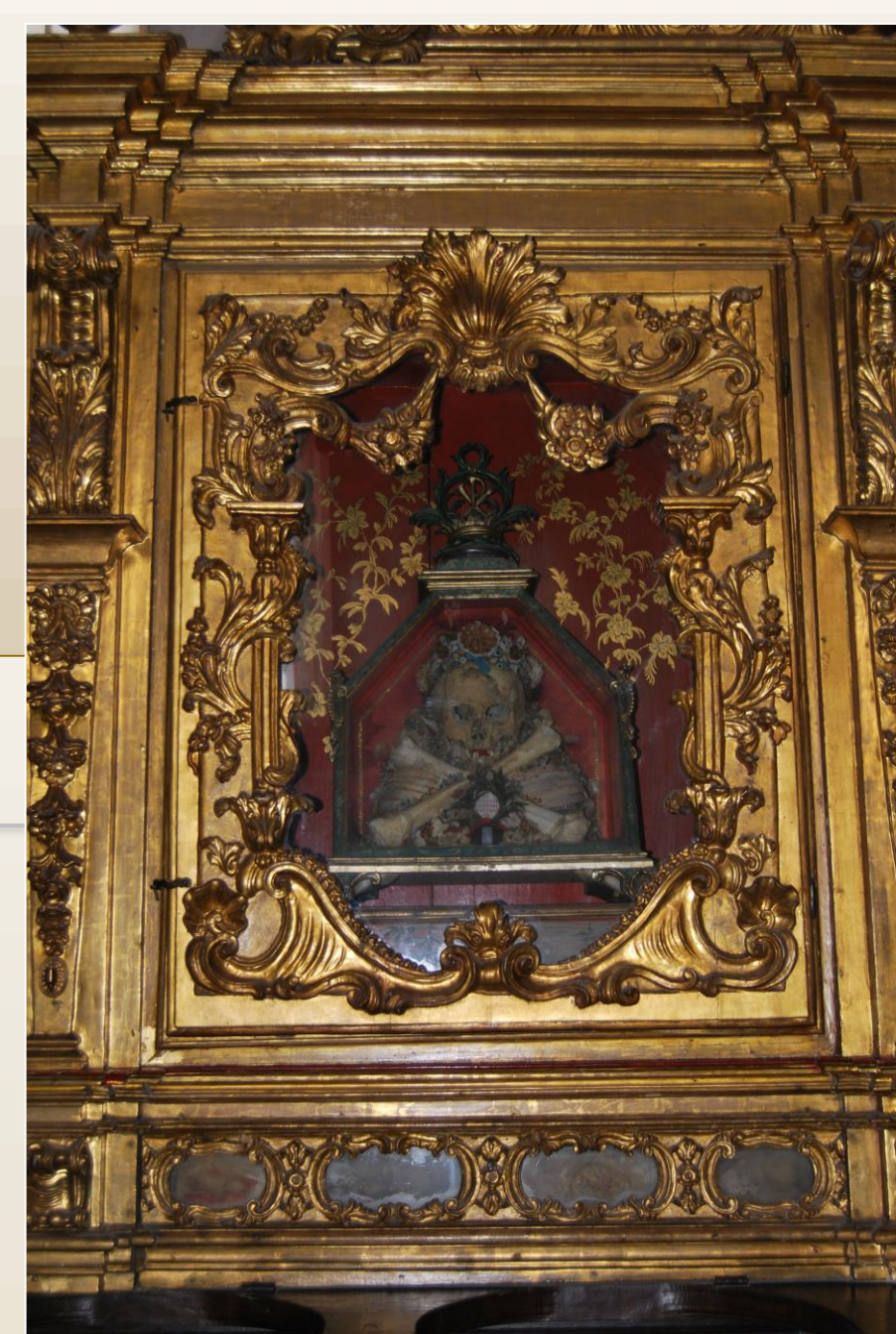


Figure 8 – Sacarium with Saint Justina's relics.

mystical experience because when the light touched it seemed that the relic had its own immanent aura. Among the several reliquaries in the collection there is a box containing a large number of relics of the 40 Martyrs from Morocco, which seems to be a small size model of the Choir (Figure 1). In this box the relics are placed in small niches all over the front sides of the chest but there are others, larger, inside. As in this box, the reliquary busts act like guardians protecting the nuns at the center of the Choir and creating the rightful conditions for them to achieve the vision of the light of the divine.

Final Remarks

Nothing in the visible world is so immaterial as light and the choice for positioning the windows in the Madre de Deus Choir helped to establish a limit between worlds, the real and the divine. This way the purpose of the architecture, the gilded decoration and the placement of the reliquaries in the room meant to help the nuns to cross the visible world and achieve the intelligible. This way, the light ceases to represent the evidence of reality and becomes an emanation of the Divinity, a gateway of transcendence and a passage for experiences beyond the common complying with what was believed to be the purpose of this Convent, a house for the Holly and a ladder to heaven.

References

- [1] Notícia da Fundação do Convento da Madre de Deos de Lisboa das Religiozas Descalças da Primeira Regra de Nossa Madre Santa Clara E de algumas couzas que ainda se puderão descobrir com certeza das vidas e mortes de muitas Madres Santas que ouve nelle, escritas por huma freira do mesmo convento, e dirigida a todas as mais delle no anno de 1639. (Autoria atribuída às Madres Sorores Joana da Piedade e Maria do Sacramento). Manuscrito de 1639-1652 (versões existentes em: Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal; Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga; Museu Nacional do Azulejo).
- [2] HUYGHE, René, Diálogo con el Arte, Barcelona, Editorial Labor, S.A., 1965.

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