

# THE UNFINISHED FAMILY

by Alfred Bosch\*

*George Orwell wanted to tear it down. While he was in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, he openly criticized the anarchists for not having blown it to pieces. From his particular point of view, the building, which he mistook for the city's cathedral, was the most hateful and embarrassing of all religious fancies. Perhaps he had heard those early-hour revolutionaries had actually tried, and failed, to blow up Antoni Gaudí's most famous work of art, the unfinished Church of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Família.*

That is precisely what happened. In July 1936, anti-clerical arsonists paid a courtesy visit to the place, alongside most other religious buildings. The trouble however, was that there was not much to burn: most of the site was just a pile of hewn stone. The rioters did as much mischief as possible with the furniture from the crypt and the hundreds of invaluable maps and documents in the old workshop, but when it came to the monument itself, they could do little more than break off chips with tools. Eventually, however, they got hold of an artillery piece and aimed it at the church. As they were about to fire, a Catalan separatist succeeded in stopping them with a ruse that the towers would be of great value as anti-aircraft nests to scare away fascist planes. This, according to the legend, is how the monument was saved.

The full story, which Orwell probably did not know or did not care to know, is in fact quite inspiring. Why should anarchist militants try to blow up the Holy Family? Well yes, of course it was a religious site, but not really a working church or convent, and nobody could ignore what Gaudí's masterpiece meant as far as artistic value was concerned. Why should a Catalan separatist risk his life in order to save such a work of art? Was there any par-

ticular connection between Catalan nationalism and artistic Catholic symbols? A small clue: take a quick look at the original four towers. Look again. Do you notice anything special?

We shall put aside such questions for a while and admit that, to all intents and purposes, the *Sagrada Família* is indeed a religious complex. Even the most uninformed of tourists will be aware of this fact, although there are reports from tour guides that after a long, detailed visit, a few Japanese visitors still ask the fateful question, 'which family did you say used to live in this house?' Anyway, all in all, it remains quite clear to most observers that the three sets of four spires stand for the twelve apostles, that the central missing spires will come to represent Mary and the Four Evangelists, and that the tallest of all will embody the Savior, Jesus Christ. Towers aside, the whole church is plagued with spiritual references and scriptural and symbolic language.

The mastermind behind such an ambitious project was a very devout man, and not someone who could be called a liberal. Gaudí was a deeply conservative Catholic, just like his patrons, the members of the Congregation of Saint Joseph or *josephines*. They

campaigned for obedience, law and order and, of course, proper demeanor in the context of traditional patriarchal families. The Holy Family was not a name chosen on a whim, it was charged with ideological as well as religious meaning. No two groups were as diametrically opposed as the *josephines* and anarchists in those troubled times, and a confrontation was eventually unavoidable. So much for the anarchists, but why on Earth should a Catalan freedom partisan, of all imaginable heroes, stop the arsonists from accomplishing their ardent mission?

The answer is quite clear; there is a third dimension to the building, that goes unnoticed by many visitors. A partly hidden explanation, which is at least as important as the religious and the artistic sides, for the Holy Family not only carries the weight of spiritual creeds and architectural excellence; it also stands for a nation. The nation, of course, is not by any means Spain, since Antoni Gaudí never felt himself to be Spanish: he was a staunch Catalan nationalist and did his best to leave a clear imprint of his condition and beliefs on his most outstanding legacy.



During the military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, Gaudí was arrested for refusing to speak to a policeman in Spanish and insisting on using his native Catalan (the fact that he dressed as a pauper most surely did not help). The matter was resolved with a few hours detention and a fine, but such language collisions seemed to be typical of Gaudí, and meant the need for interpreters when the King of Spain, the writer Unamuno or other celebrities showed up at the *Sagrada Família*, according to witnesses at the time.

The famous architect seldom wrote anything down, but occasional annotations of his, plus reported conversations with colleagues, point to the idea that he

felt very strongly about a marked Catalan spirit as distinct from a Spanish (or Castilian) personality. He believed that Catalans were Mediterraneans, prone to a special sensibility connected with a milder climate, the influence of the sea and a very subtle sense of color, that is more subdued and responsive to hues. According to Gaudí, Spaniards were some sort of black and white ascetics: good for conquering or chasing Jews, and little else.

---

**THERE IS A THIRD DIMENSION TO THE BUILDING,  
THAT GOES UNNOTICED BY MANY VISITORS**

---

Gaudí thought there was something fundamental, something basic, which marked the Catalans' national character. He strove to convey it in his works, first with a romantic-gothic look (much more Frankish or Germanic than Hispanic-Moorish), and thereafter with his use of materials. The things he employed and the craftsmanship he applied were clearly Catalan: wrought iron techniques (his father was in fact a cauldron maker), local ceramics, local stone, local glass. He insisted on the austere nature of everything: ordinary, cheap brick and polychromes based on shattered tiles (*trencadís*). He certainly did not reject the label of Catalans being tight-fisted, as the Jews or Scots of Spain. He actually cultivated the stereotype.

The genius of the Holy Family lies in the notion that the results will be much better if the building rises slowly, thanks to many small, private donations. 'My boss is not in a hurry', he used to say, and we cannot tell if he was referring to God or to his country. In any case, the excruciatingly slow trickle of humble alms, which guaranteed the expiation of individual sins (which is what the church was all about), appar-

ently ensured that innovations would be applied and digested only very gradually. Huge contributions and lavish spending were seen as big risks, not only for the spiritual process, but for the artistic enterprise as well.

Gaudí's state of mind would fit with what Catalans recognize as '*seny*', a word with no adequate translation in any other language, being something close to both 'common sense' and 'propriety'. The natural opposite of '*seny*' in Catalonia is '*rauxa*', another untranslatable term which would take us close to the domain of 'dissipation'. Indeed, the *Sagrada Família* surely has its own share of insanity, with its sheer size (at present and especially in the future), in its baroque details, in the dreamlike overflow of pious motifs, and the mere thought that such an excessive project can be undertaken with such meager resources. In fact, this contrast or contradiction between *seny* and *rauxa* is not the only genuinely Catalan game of opposites in the church.

Must we remind ourselves that the temple was promoted by ultra-Catholics in the most anticlerical of cities? That its architect was celibate, perhaps even a misanthrope, and yet embarked on a megalomaniac tribute to the traditional holy family? That the greatest of talents was given absolute creative freedom by the most reactionary and conservative of religious brotherhoods (the *jozephines*)? That a construction process of some 130 years, which could well take twice as long, may finally be completed when there is not a single practicing Catholic in sight? That a temple, the most conventional, consecrated and sacred kind of building is seen to represent a country? The most unusual, bizarre and complex kind of nation?

There is a sweet justification for this last contradiction, however.

Gaudí was probably aware of it, and we can be sure he relished the image of a country and basilica rising in parallel, both growing together. To put it plainly, both the church and the country are a work in progress. They are both unfinished: in the case of the Holy Family, it is quite obvious, but so to in the case of Catalonia, if you come to think of it. The Catalan nation is stateless, it is not internationally recognised, it has been crushed at times and it has reemerged, it has reinvented itself time and again, never reaching true adulthood. There is always an unmistakable air of teenage self-doubt about Catalonia. This is possibly the reason why both, church and land, can become so terribly appealing to the inquisitive mind, as unfinished families and unfinished creatures like adolescents often are.

So how can we recognize this powerful message of Catalan personality in the Sagrada Família? Gaudí was very fond of imagery and symbolism, so it is inconceivable that he would not have accompanied the religious signs with their national or cultural counterparts. In actual fact he did: the building is full of clues, you just need to find them. To start with, all inscriptions are either in the more ritual Latin, or else in the straightforward language of the people –i.e. Catalan. There is not one permanent engraving in Spanish. Furthermore, if one cares to examine the old Nativity façade, the one that Gaudí personally oversaw, there is no way one can ignore the rounded shapes reminding us of Montserrat (the Catalan holy mountain).

To top it all, we must, of course, come back to the groups of four towers. Have you spotted the undeniable visual statement? There is a symbolic expression in those four spires, rising to the clouds like four fingers on a hand, the thumb chopped off. No, not yet? Fair enough, some experts on tradition and folklore will point out the resemblance between the shape of the needles and the quaint steep parabola of human towers (*castells*) so typical of Gaudí's birthplace, the countryside around Tarragona. Not a shadow of a doubt; the Catalan human castles, a lesson in group solidarity, balance and strength through togetherness, were present in the designer's mind when he drew those shapes.

---

**THERE IS A SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION IN THOSE FOUR SPIRES, RISING TO THE CLOUDS LIKE FOUR FINGERS OF A HAND WITH THE THUMB CHOPPED OFF**

---

So why on Earth should the towers be assembled in groups of four? To be honest, it is not a common arrangement: how many churches have façades with four spires in a row? Islamic minarets? That was clearly not what our good old genius had in mind when he conceived his masterpiece. To add up to the 12 apostles, he could have grouped them in twos or threes or sixes: why fours? The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind. Just take a look at the Catalan flag (not the Spanish banner which, believe it or not, is derived from the older Catalan flag). What distinguishes the Catalan flag from its younger Spanish rival? Colour? Pattern? No, dear reader. I'm sure you've got it by now.

\*ALFRED BOSCH

ALFRED BOSCH (BARCELONA, 1961). WRITER AND JOURNALIST. HE HOLDS A PHD IN HISTORY FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA. HE HAS BECOME A PRESTIGIOUS AFRICANIST IN ACADEMIC CIRCLES AND A RENOWNED WRITER WITH A PROLIFIC OUTPUT COVERING EVERYTHING FROM ESSAYS TO NOVELS. HIS WORK HAS BEEN WELL RECEIVED BY BOTH READERS AND CRITICS AND SEVERAL OF THEM HAVE WON AWARDS. CURRENTLY HE LECTURES ON AFRICAN HISTORY AT POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY AND IS DIRECTOR OF THE CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES.

