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*“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,  
coming down out of heaven from God.” (Rev 21,2)*

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEOLOGY OF THE CITY  
SELECTED CHAPTERS OF A POSSIBLE APPROACH

~ THESIS BOOKLET ~

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The contemporary theology of the city originated in South-America and the presentation of its possible European effects have been the focus of my doctoral researches. In addition, I have also explored how this theology is related to bordering fields such as architecture, urbanism, visual arts and the law. The idea of the theology of the city was developed by South-American theological reflections in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by the inspiration of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, an encyclical written by Pope Paul VI. Pope Francis, during his service as cardinal and at the beginning of his papacy, emphasised the idea that the way of the church, the new evangelization leads back to the people through the city, the place of culture. In my work, I attempt to reveal and justify the systematic theological background of this concept. In my researches I have examined how the “city” has become one of the most important organising aspects of Christianity in a wider sense and of Catholic theology in a strict sense. The city in this respect has come to be regarded as the space of human freedom. The Jesuit theologian Michel de Certeau's work reflects this thinking especially relevantly, so I believe the discussion of Michel de Certeau's oeuvre in my dissertation is particularly noteworthy. My researches and corresponding theses regarding the city and its space theories have not only been engaged in an interactive dialogue and debate with de Certeau, but also with his contemporaries: Michel Foucault and Guy Debord.

My studies have primarily focused on how Michel de Certeau viewed and understood the city, as opposed to the other two authors. I connected the concepts developed in this debate with the so-called *Aparecida Document* closing the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conferences. As a result, such theological perspective and content of the city has finally evolved that may serve as a basis for Pope Francis' concept and program of new evangelization. Furthermore, I believe my work is mostly an introduction covering such an important topic that is already a prominent, yet little discussed and elaborated theme of contemporary theology. On the other hand, my work also designates a possible approach to the theology of the city: in my dissertation I tried to identify the points where the city may be included in certain dogmatic tracts. Regarding the relationship between city and subject, the theology of the city has a relevant message both for the theology of grace and creation.

Beyond my doctoral thesis, I strived to show how significant the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas is with regard to the oeuvre of one of the most prominent architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I elaborate this in a separate chapter with the title “*Beauty is the*

*Glitter of Truth; the Appearance of Saint Thomas Aquinas' Concept of Truth in the Architectural Theory of Mies van der Rohe*".

I have systematically revealed in my dissertation the central role of the great scholastic theologian's concept of truth in the architectural theory of Mies van der Rohe through his most important buildings, in order to show that modern and contemporary theology is (was) frequently perceptible in such bordering fields that have avoided our attention until now – and to open this statement for discussion. As scholastic philosophy has been fruitfully present in modern architecture both with regard to content and form, conversely, architecture may also have a decisive effect on theology if we reveal and understand the influence on each other. By the end of my dissertation I managed to develop an individual approach and content to the theology of the city that connects contemporary South-American theological approaches with European traditions and with the bordering fields mentioned above.

In my thesis I regard the city as such a multidisciplinary category (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) that can represent the condensed memory of its own culture and society and at the same time express the perceived interrelations of the present through the forms of representation. The city is created in such a continuous oscillation that only crystallizes for moments. A general, though paradoxical characteristic of this process is that it is statically permanent, although always in change.

Although we may approximate the city, and, as I will refer to this later several times, each science may define it along the lines of their own hermeneutics, it cannot be put into a conceptual framework exhaustively while preserving its completeness. This is the reason why I argue that the city is a unique multidisciplinary category possessing the characteristic of art being beyond reason; thus, it can never be objectively defined and limited. This limitlessness allows the blooming of variety and fullness that the city as the parchment of human culture and civilization carries. This same limitlessness at the same time may direct our thoughts to the infinity of God.

Even if I refuse to conceptually define the city, I still feel right to provide a possible approach to the theology of the city itself. I have already mentioned that I regard the city in a wide sense as an organising force that has always been present in the history of the church and theology. Narrowing the concept, I attempted to identify aspects that reflect content and perspective I consider part of the theology of the city. These

are not exhaustive and final, but fragmentary aspects; imprints of the hermeneutical perspective that help us approach the theology of the city in my view.

I consider the following aspects when discussing the theology of the city:

- A new linguistic discourse originating in a major city, started by South-American theology (*Aparecida Document*) and later developed in the declarations of Pope Francis (*Evangelii Gaudium*).
- Certain ecclesiological directions of “the Argentinean *people’s theology*”, especially those that apply to “*God’s believers*”.
- The concept and reality of poverty as social exclusion, stemming from this theological background.
- The theological reflection of the city as the presence and impacts of God.
- The theological interpretation of the modern unit of the city and culture described by South-American theology.
- The theological reflection about the city as the scope of the church.
- The theological examination of the city as the constitutive element of the development of the human subject.
- The theological examination of city as the scope and place of human and social freedom.
- The (Biblical-dogmatic) theological interpretation of the relationship between the city and evil (sin).
- The examination of the city as the place where the social teachings of the church are realised.
- The Biblical, fundamental, historical and doctrinal examination of the role of city in the history of Catholic theology.
- The understanding of the city as the intersection of architecture, urbanism, urban planning and theology, especially with regard to individual and social freedom and the fulfilment of human nature.
- The relationship between urban architecture and sacred arts.

In summary, in my dissertation I strived to react to the theological worldview of Pope Francis presented in Chapter 2, along the lines of the tasks I have formulated. I attempted to develop a method that takes us closer to understanding the city. I aimed

at identifying markers that could help theology in a strict sense to appear in this culture, and Christianity in a wider sense to recognise itself in this urban reality.

In Chapter 3 I tried to identify the most important images of the city appearing in the Holy Scripture.

In Chapter 4 I attempted to outline the significance of the city regarding the history of theology and its effects, at chosen points in history during early Christianity, in respect of the medieval city.

In Chapter 5 I examined the city as a constitutive element of the person, more specifically, of Christian existence, in light of the theory of Max Weber and primarily the Chicago school.

In Chapter 6 I analysed the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century architects. Le Corbusier is part of a tradition that had sought for a century the practical possibility to “restore” and “fulfil” human nature, including society’s morality. Le Corbusier found the solution in the urban architectural concept built on the home, which strongly rests on Christian grounds at least in two respects. I separately examined Le Corbusier’s relationship with the oeuvre of priest Couturier, who conceived modern arts and architecture as a basis for the renewal of Christian sacred art and Christianity itself. I summarize the theses of this central chapter as follows:

I. The quick process of man’s alienation – and in parallel, the awareness of the need for salvation – is clearly perceivable through the orientation of the technologically sensitive modern industrial culture developed following the enlightenment. Moreover, the question and problem of evil and human alienation is also relevant.

II. Considering the historical context, the French revolution in 1789 already strived to remedy the moral deficiencies of man and society by renewing the city and architecture.

III. Le Corbusier was thinking on the grounds of this tradition when declaring the “restoration” of human nature, by means of organic urban architecture starting from the home (Unité d’Habitation), directed from the inside outwards. The consequence of this would be the ethical renewal and development of the individual and society.

IV. Le Corbusier's anthropological perfectionism (*modulor*) assumes that from the "human perspective", an architectural and social program well-integrating industrial and technical devices can improve and even defeat the structural evil.

V. By complementing, correcting, identifying and describing the problems and suggestions for solutions (often stemming from Christian backgrounds) Le Corbusier outlined, many concepts of theology and the message of revelation may be understandable for the society.

VI. Priest Couturier's ideas of modern arts and architecture may be interpreted as follows: even if not inspired by religious experiences, arts at all times reflect the particular reality and life of contemporary society. For Christianity, this is the life it has to meet and deal with. If there is no natural, then there is no supernatural either.

VII. We need mutual dialogue and inculturation, based on Lafont and Couturier. The methodology of this can be well established from the joint work of Le Corbusier and Couturier and the previous experiences of Christianity.

VIII. Points for interpretation from the perspective of Catholic theology:

Two decisive elements of the modern, industrial age and technology to be used for Le Corbusierian aims may be integrated:

The technological devices and achievements, as we have seen in the case of the chapel of Ronchamp, are suitable for expressing religious experience and representing theological contents in the language of form and material of the age.

The market- and profit-oriented industry should become social, which does not mean giving up private ownership or ethical profit.

IX. It is urbanism and the city that concerns human existence and nature the most in its structure; thus, their convergence – urban architecture starting out from the people – between the borders of human freedom may take man closer to its own created reality. An example of this could be monasticism and its architectural and social tradition.

I consider Chapter 7 essentially the theoretical background of *Evangelii Gaudium* discussed above. The works of Guy Debord and Michel de Foucault I analysed may provide an explanation in several respects for how such an urban-cultural reality may develop that restricts – and, in the case of Debord, completely abolishes – human freedom so much; in addition, they also shed light on the intellectual and economical-political reasons. As a result, we may ask the theological question of grace: Does man have freedom at all?

To better understand EG 71-75, Michel de Certeau's work provides the best background in my view. Already in the 1980s, Certeau's focus of research was the everyday activities and practices of the "silent mass" of the cities, the people who are always on their way (walk) as strangers in such a system (city) that is not their creation and whose culture they have not established. Certeau in his most important work clearly argues with the Debord's and Foucault's determinism, while also helping the reader to understand the path leading to the man of the modern major city and thus to the core of the city. To walk this path is necessary for Christianity to see in its depth what is human, and for us, Christians: "*to meet every challenge as a leaven of Gospel witness in every culture and in every city will make us better Christians and bear fruit in our cities*" (EG 75). Finally, I attempted to present two contemporary conceptions in Chapter 7.

My dissertation does not contain any separate systematic part. The reason for this is that I summarized my theses and systematic conclusions chapter by chapter, through interpretations updating them. I considered it practical that theological texts in dialogue with bordering fields including different perspectives separately carry the statements through which I believe the theology of the city can be approached today, also in terms of content. Therefore, these texts remain at their point of origin and do not suffer damage by being removed.

By getting acquainted with and providing a theological reading of certain bordering fields, my aim was to get to know the city and its role in the history of theology, both theoretically and in practice, and to found a possible theology of the city.

During my doctoral researches, I published a study in this topic: SÁGHY, Ádám, *A középkori város teológiai és jogtörténeti jelentősége* [The Significance of the Medieval City in Theology and the History of Law]. In: *Szabályozáskomplexitás*. [Complexity of Regulation]. Acta Caroliensia Conventorum Scientiarum Iuridico-

Politicarum XXXV. Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. Budapest, 2021.

In addition, a significant part of my topic was built into and published in a volume I edited together with my colleague, Ádám Wappler: SÁGHY, Ádám WAPPLER, Ádám, *Bevezetés az Újszövetségbe* [Introduction to the New Testament]. Szent István Társulat, Budapest 2021.

Furthermore, my research topic was well received in Pope Saint John Paul II Research Institute of Pázmány Péter Catholic University, where a Local Communities – City of God research group was formed in 2020. I support the group by undertaking scientific secretarial tasks. We examine and analyze the city as the borderline field of theology, law, urban planning and architecture.