



*Thomas Roma's photographs of religious services in Brooklyn churches will be exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from April through June 1996. In association with the exhibition the Museum will publish the photographs in a book, Come Sunday.*

*Come Sunday* Thomas Roma As a fourth grader, while other boys my age were collecting baseball cards, I made maps. Before I left home, my family moved thirteen times, but we never left Brooklyn. With each move to a new neighborhood, I grew more and more to believe that Brooklyn stretched on forever, stopping only at the ocean that I'd seen at Coney Island. My ambition was to capture it all in maps. My maps always had at their center a Catholic church. By foot, bus, elevated train, or borrowed bicycle, I would travel to a church, walk the stations of the cross, and then set out in a spiral fashion to draw the streets and intersecting avenues—noting the most important landmarks like schools, candy stores, and pizzerias. I was combining my fascination with the explorers I was learning about in school and the saints in religious instruction. I was both adventurer and pilgrim.

In January 1990 I began a project photographing houses of worship in Brooklyn. As my fortieth birthday approached, spiritual matters became very important to me, and I was looking for a way to address them in my work. Having lived in Brooklyn my whole life I knew that it was once called the City of Churches. Each wave of immigrants, from the first Dutch settlers on, built their own church, sometimes resulting in two or more on the same block. I planned to make a book of architectural photographs encompassing all denominations, something of a cross between *The Idea of Louis Sullivan* and *The American Monument*. I decided to call it *God's Work*. For a year and a half I photographed everything from large temples to storefront mosques.

One morning while I was photographing a black Christian church in a converted Orthodox Jewish temple, the pastor came out. Seeing my camera, he asked me if he could be of some assistance. I told him that I was making a survey of Brooklyn churches. After hearing that, he invited me inside for a talk. He asked me what I really hoped for from my work. I answered that I was trying to make religious pictures and told him of my plan for a book. He suggested that it was possible that I wasn't looking in the right place, that God's work was not the building but what was going on inside. He invited me to photograph his service the following Sunday. That first service I attended and photographed changed everything. From that Sunday on, for the next three years almost without a break, I went from church to church meeting pastors. I told them what I had originally set out to do and how my understanding of the project had changed and continued to change. I said that with photographs I hoped to show something of the spirituality of the service. Instead of asking permission to photograph I asked for an invitation to join the congregation. I visited over two hundred churches. It became a kind of pilgrimage, and I worked hard to do justice to the incredible beauty I witnessed every Sunday. In all I photographed about 150 services in fifty-two black Christian churches in Brooklyn. It could have gone on much longer and only ended because I needed to give some shape to what I had experienced—to make the book now called *Come Sunday*.

Recently I woke from a dream about my boyhood walks making maps. For a while that morning, I struggled to remember it. As always, the more I tried, the less I remembered, until all I was left with was a strong sense of how I felt those summer days with my number two pencil and my sister's stenopad for a sketch book. It was not the feeling of wanting to possess but to be possessed, of wanting to be part of something. I then realized how much that need to belong has driven me as a photographer and even determined what I have photographed.

Although the pictures are from many churches, *Come Sunday* represents one congregation. A congregation of people who had faith in what I was trying to do—with open hearts, they set aside differences in doctrine, nationality, and race, and invited me in.