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Holy Week in the Holy Land

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Holy Week in the Holy Land

Unlike the pilgrims of an earlier day who used to climb the weary miles from Joppa to Jerusalem on foot or donkey-back, we had come from Damascus via Amman and the Jericho road in the fleet luxury of a bright red 1959 De Soto. Despite our speed we only reached the cool heights of the holy city long after sundown on Tuesday of Holy Week. The night was clear but dark, for the paschal moon was not yet high enough in the eastern sky to illumine our way. We could see little therefore of the sacred sites that were pointed out to us by the driver as we sped past. Bethany was no more than a handful of dim lights strewn along the roadside; Gethsemane with its garden and basilica only indistinct patches of shadow at the foot of a mountain of ebony we were told was Olivet. To the left, across the Kedron valley and high above Gethsemane, rose the temple wall, a black silhouette stretched taut across the starlit sky.

We circled that wall to an opening in it called Damascus Gate. There we had to leave our cushioned comfort and trudge the rest of the way on foot to lodgings within the city. The streets of that particular section of old Jerusalem were too narrow and too steep for automobile traffic. Our luggage was hauled in a mountainous pile on the back of an Arab porter whose legs were muscled steel. The crowds were not noticeably large, for much of the city had already retired.

But next morning we found Jerusalem bursting at the seams. Visitors overflowed everywhere. It was impossible to walk. One had to push his way through a motley mass of humanity choking the narrow streets. With the passage of the years Jerusalem has lost none of its magnetic attraction, especially during the paschal season, for tourists and pilgrims.

Centuries ago Saint Jerome had written: "It would take long to tell how many bishops, how many martyrs, how many men learned in the faith have come to Jerusalem since the Lord ascended . . . They believe they would be lacking in religion, knowledge and virtue if they had not adored Christ where the Gospel first flashed forth from the Cross. A faithful Christian must needs worship there where the feet of the Lord have stood; must see as if fresh the traces of the Nativity, of the Cross and Passion." A typical example of that ancient ardor was Jerome's disciple Paula of whom it was said that she "made the rounds of all the holy places with such zeal that had she not been hastening to others, she would never have left the first ones she saw."

It must be admitted however, that not all the saints of old shared her enthusiasm. As early as 295 Saint Anthony the Hermit had

attacked the love of traveling for its own sake. Curiosity and love of adventure apparently diluted, all too often, the nobler motive in the hearts of pilgrims to Jerusalem. Saint Gregory of Nyssa warned of serious danger to soul and body inherent in such pious peregrinations. "Listen to my words," he said. "Before I ever saw Jerusalem I knew that Christ was very God. My stay there neither took from nor added to my faith. I knew that God was born of a Virgin before I saw Bethlehem's stable. I believed in the Lord's resurrection before I looked upon the church built in its memory . . . Thus little profit did I get from my journey. I learned that our places at home are far more holy than those abroad. So you who fear the Lord, praise Him wherever you are. Change of place does not bring God nearer. Everywhere God will come to you, if there be found a home within you where He may walk and dwell."

It is easy of course, to speak as Gregory does — "No need to go a — pilgrimaging; places at home are holier than those abroad" — when one has already, as he had, been to the Holy Land. One may, it is true, reach the courts of heaven "as directly from Britain as from Jerusalem". But there is merit too in the desire to worship "there where the feet of the Lord have stood and see as if still fresh the traces of the Passion." Holy Week in Jerusalem last year was an experience that I, like Paula, would not have wanted to miss. Yet with Gregory I must confess it was not always edifying, and only rarely was it deeply moving and devotional.

For example: On Good Friday, at about eleven o'clock in the morning, thousands of pilgrims crowded into the courtyard of a Moslem school which stands on the site of the old fortress Antonia. It was there, an old tradition says, that Pilate sat in judgment and passed the death sentence upon our Lord. The pilgrims assembled in language groups preparatory to making the public Way of the Cross. I joined the Italian group led by the Franciscans, for that was the first to start. We followed the traditional stations in a zig-zag route through the narrow streets from Pilate's tribunal to the site of the crucifixion. Bakeries and bazaars and butcher shops were doing business as usual all along the way. The crowds were dense in more senses than one, and it was only by dexterous use of elbow and hip that one could keep from being pushed back and becoming hopelessly lost in the rear of the line. The sun was hot and the walk of perhaps a kilometer and a half was, even without a cross to weigh one down, quite exhausting.

The tenth to the fourteenth stations are located within the Holy Sepulchre Basilica. Just inside the entrance to the right, two narrow wooden stairways lead to a kind of mezzanine floor. There at the far end of a rectangular chapel is the rock of Calvary. Ownership

of the Calvary chapel is divided between the dissident Greek Orthodox and the Latin Catholics. The Greeks own and have custody of the altar over the traditional site of the crucifixion, while the Latins have two altars just to the right of the sacred rock. By mutual agreement the Greeks are supposed to yield place to the Latin Catholics before Calvary when the public Way of the Cross approaches the twelfth station. This year however, on our arrival, a sizeable group of Greek women who were praying there refused to budge. The Franciscans at the head of our procession quietly but firmly insisted on their rights. Not to have done so might have set a dangerous precedent. But all they got for their polite pains were angry looks and shrill feminine rebukes. The impasse was broken by eight husky Jordan policemen, all of them probably Moslems, in khaki uniforms and sharp-spiked helmets similar to those worn by German soldiers in World War I. They formed a cordon and pushed the women out of the way by sheer physical force. Only then were we able to continue our Way of the Cross. The actual crucifixion scene could hardly have been more disorderly.

The factions and divisions within Christianity are nowhere more painfully evident than in what should be the most sacred shrine of Christendom — the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. The basilica encloses not only our Lord's burial place, as the name indicates, but also the site of Calvary which we have just described. The building is an eyesore. And it is a heartache too, for in its cracked and aging ugliness it symbolizes only too well the schisms which have rent the Church of Christ.

The present building is a patchwork of elements dating from the various periods in the structure's history. That history dates from the time of Constantine the Great. He built the first basilica which was dedicated in the year 336. In the Persian invasion under Chosroes II, that original structure was completely destroyed. Two decades later a second building was erected, only to be laid waste by Mohammedan hordes in 1010. When the Crusaders recaptured Jerusalem they in their turn constructed a magnificent basilica on the site of the Holy Sepulchre. Partly destroyed by fire in 1808, it was renovated according to the design of a Greek architect, Commenes, at the expense of the dissident Greeks and Armenians.

At the present time the entrance to the basilica is covered by a huge steel scaffolding set up to buttress the outer wall lest it buckle and collapse into the courtyard. Within, the building is so extremely dark that it is impossible even at mid-day to see the shrines and chapels it contains without the aid of artificial light. Only in the rotunda around the sepulchre under the main dome is the lighting at all adequate; and it might be better were that too veiled in darkness. The dome's interior was described thirty years

ago by Father Meistermann in his famous *GUIDE TO THE HOLY LAND* in the following terms: "The paint is already peeling off and hanging in shreds to the cupola, reminding one of wall-paper soaked and coming off from damp." Today there are fewer "shreds" hanging from the mouldy stone, but otherwise the description of thirty years ago still holds true.

Most distressing of all, perhaps, is the sight of hundreds of rough, criss-crossed planks trussing up the whole lower half of the rotunda. The building is falling apart. These wooden supports together with the exterior steel scaffold have been erected to prevent it from collapsing altogether. It is obviously time to remove the old and build a new basilica worthy of the sacred shrine it shelters.

Why has this not been done?

The reason is simple — divided Christianity. The building has too many owners. Latin Catholics share proprietorship with dissident Greeks, Armenians, Syrians and Copts. A generation ago, the Apostolic Delegate to Palestine proposed a plan for a new basilica which had been capably prepared by the Italian architects, Marangoni and Barluzzi. The plan met with coldness on the part of the Eastern dissidents; and even the Latin Catholics manifested unreasonable reluctance to destroy "a monument of such venerable antiquity."

Today the main opposition seems to come from the Orthodox Greeks. They fear, not without reason, that if a new building is constructed they may lose the privileged position they hold in the old. At the present time they own the main altar on Calvary, as we have seen, and exercise considerable control over the little chapel which enshrines the sepulchre itself. But if a new basilica is built, and the construction is financed mainly by the Latin Catholics, it is only natural that the latter would expect rights and privileges in the new building commensurate with their contributions. The obstructionist policy of the Greeks, therefore, though unfortunate, is understandable. And so, to the dismay and disappointment of countless pilgrims who come to pray within its walls, the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre continues to stand, a big, blind beggar of a building propped up on its crutches, a constant reminder of Christian disunity.

This divisiveness within Christianity, so manifest in its very holy of holies is, as I have said, a real heartache. It is in a sense a continuation of the Passion. Its one redeeming feature is that it moves every thinking man who sees it to more intense fervor in his prayers for the success of the ecumenical movement — that all

may be one, a united, not a divided flock, under the gentle guidance of one Shepherd.

Yet it does not take long to become accustomed to this distressing situation. After a few days, even the uniformed, spike-helmeted constabulary at strategic and sensitive spots *inside* the Christian churches — not only in the Holy Sepulchre, but in Bethlehem's Basilica of the Nativity too, and wherever different rites have "rights" — cease to seem offensively strange and out of place.

Sometimes their presence is acutely necessary; as in the incident of the Greek women stubbornly intrenched before Calvary on Good Friday morning. On that same day, later in the afternoon, the police had to intervene a second time. Two minority sects came to blows near the basilica's entrance over some privilege that appears to have been violated by one of the battling parties. An alarm was sounded. With surprising promptness a riot squad of about fifty Jordan policemen deployed in the courtyard, pushed their way through the crowd, and without noise or perceptible physical force quelled the disturbance with remarkable efficiency.

I must confess that I left Jerusalem with the deepest respect and admiration for the Jordan tourist police, many of whom are Moslems, but who do their duty of maintaining peace and order among rival Christian sects with calm, firm and respectful efficiency; and for the spiritual "police", the Franciscan custodians of the holy places, who in the discharge of their office and in the ceremonies at which they officiate, manage to achieve a degree of reverence and devotion that, given the circumstances, seems all but impossible. Over the years, experience and practice have taught them how to prescind from what the inexperienced priest would find intolerable distractions. Deeply impressive too is the cordial hospitality which the Franciscans extend to pilgrims in the holy land. One really does not know the Franciscans until he has seen them at work and lived with them in what they call with warm affection their *Terra Santa*.

Good Friday morning furnished a shining example of some of these Franciscan virtues. Jerusalem is perhaps the only place in the world where the old Holy Week ritual is still followed. Because of the difficulties with their co-owners of the Holy Sepulchre, it was and still is impossible for the Franciscans to change the time order of the Holy Week services so as to bring them into conformity with the revised ritual. Consequently the Mass of the Presanctified is still held on the morning of Good Friday. Holy Communion is not distributed to the faithful. And the Mass of the Resurrection is celebrated in the early hours, not of Easter Sunday morning as in the new ritual, but of Saturday morning as of old.

On Good Friday morning then, I attended the services in the Holy Sepulchre Basilica. They were held at the Latin rite altar in the Calvary chapel. The crowd was immense, but as a priest I was able to get a privileged place close to the altar. Other rites were holding services at the same time in other parts of the basilica. Every now and then, the Copts who have a small chapel in the rotunda just behind the sepulchre itself began a weird sort of wail, like a shrill wordless scream that kept rising and falling for minutes on end. The Irish would surely have said it was the wail of the banshee. Yet in spite of the shrieking, and in spite of the cramped space into which they were pressed by the crowds, the Franciscans carried on the Mass with remarkable composure, decorum and reverent devotion. The three priests who had been appointed to chant the solemn Passion were extremely fine singers. And the result was that even I who had come resigned to share in only a kind of passive penitential endurance of the services, was able to enter into the Franciscan spirit and attain a surprising measure of recollection and devotion despite the adverse circumstances. And always there was the realization, more intense at some moments than at others, that I was standing in the place where centuries ago "stabat Mater dolorosa, iuxta crucem, lacrymosa, dum pendeat Filius."

On Holy Saturday morning, "when it began to dawn, the sun being not yet risen", I made my way again through the narrow and already crowded streets of old Jerusalem to the Holy Sepulchre for the *Lumen Christi* and the Holy Saturday Mass. I arrived at what I had thought would be a sufficiently early hour, 5:30 a.m. Yet the rotunda of the basilica where the Mass was to be held was already so jammed that it was impossible to get in. And as usual there were the composed but efficient policemen on guard at all the doors. I wandered around through the dark corridors, back and forth from door to door, hearing now and again a snatch of the chant from within but nothing more. And there were innumerable others like myself walking about or "sitting in exterior darkness." At one point however, light did shine into that darkness. It was when the celebrant intoned the "Gloria" of the old Easter Saturday Mass. Then the booming notes of an organ shattered the silence and huge gongs were banged triumphantly. A visible thrill of emotion ran through the crowd. Eyes lit up. Men and women stood on tip-toes straining to get even a fleeting glimpse of what was going on under the glowing lights within. Sparks of Easter joy had fallen once again on human hearts.

The crowds, usually so distracting and an all but insurmountable obstacle to devotion, can at times provide inspiration too. I found them so that morning. Like the multitude whom Peter

addressed on Pentecost, there were in Jerusalem that day "devout men out of every nation under the sun." Every color and class were represented. There were well-dressed, affluent Americans sitting side by side with Easterners in distinctive national costumes. One group in particular attracted attention—women in flowing black robes, and round, black, flat-topped turbans embroidered with cloth of gold. There were groups of Europeans too; Germans and Swiss, French and Italians. There was an old German woman, standing as close as she could get to one of the doorways. The winds of seventy years had left their mark upon her bronzed and wrinkled face. She was seeing nothing and hearing very little of the Mass; yet the depth and intensity of her devotion were unmistakable. Fervor radiated from her. Unquestionably the crowds that morning, although they prevented me from attending the Mass as I would have liked, nevertheless did give me a richer appreciation of how strong and deep and real the faith can be.

Holy Thursday should have been spent, at least in part, in the Cenacle on Mount Sion where our Lord ate the Last Supper with His Apostles. But that, unfortunately, was not possible. The border line dividing the new state of Israel from still hostile Jordan passes through Jerusalem, and Sion with the Cenacle is the only part of the old city which lies in Israel territory. However, the Franciscans conducted a service in the Garden of Gethsemane that evening which proved to be one of the more memorable events of the week.

On the site of our Lord's prayer and agony stands a beautiful church called the Church of All Nations. It is of moderate size and recent date, having been consecrated only in 1924. The usual crushing crowds filled every inch of space within its walls by the time the service started at eight o'clock in the evening. The ceremony was extremely simple, yet it would be difficult to conceive a better way of commemorating the event which had taken place on that spot on the first Holy Thursday night.

In the sanctuary, before the main altar and beside the rock to which tradition points as the place of our Lord's agony, stood two unadorned lecterns; nothing more. Bearded Franciscans in white albs and violet stoles entered and took their places before the lecterns. One of them then chanted in Latin the first part of the passion narrative which describes the happenings in Gethsemane. When he had finished, the second priest chanted exactly the same thing, but this time in Arabic, the local vernacular. That done, both priests then knelt, and priests and people meditated in silence upon the words that had been read. To have been one of that huge crowd, meditating together in the silent darkness upon such a theme in that particular place was a deeply moving ex-

perience. Meditation for once was easy. After seven or eight minutes, a *Pater, Ave* and *Gloria* were recited in Latin, and a hymn was sung by the choir. The priests then chanted in turn another section of the passion narrative, paused, and priests and people again knelt in silent meditation. The procedure was repeated four or five times until the gospel's account of the events in Gethsemane had been chanted and meditated upon in its entirety.

That was all. It was very simple, yet it would be hard to conceive a more suitable way of responding to our Lord's heart-broken plea, "Could you not watch one hour with Me?" The thousands of us present in Gethsemane that night did "watch and pray one hour" with Him, there under the olive trees in the light of the paschal moon.

It may be true, as Saint Gregory of Nyssa insists, that change of place does not bring God nearer. Yet it is also true, as Paula well knew, that it is an enviable privilege to be able "to worship there where the feet of the Lord have stood and see as if still fresh the traces of His Cross and Passion."

J. J. KAVANAGH

History and Philippine Culture'

This paper will be devoted to a discussion of the following questions: (1) What does history tell us about our national culture? (2) Can history tell us anything more about it? (3) What must we do to extract this additional information?

I

The present unsatisfactory state of historical studies among us is one of the reasons why we cannot define our national culture as clearly and accurately as we would wish. Our knowledge of our past can only be described as spotty. About certain periods and aspects of it we know a great deal; about other periods and aspects hardly anything. We have pushed our researches into the minutest details of Rizal's life to almost incredible lengths; but so decisive a development in our economic and social history as the Tobacco

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