

## EASTER IN SAN JUAN

By JAMES R. LOTHIAN, Our North American Correspondent,

My WIFE, youngest daughter and I spent Easter and the latter part of Holy Week in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The Mass on Easter, the Mass of the pre-sanctified on Good Friday – both in the 16<sup>th</sup> century cathedral of San Juan Bautista – and most especially the Via Crucis through the streets of Old San Juan, following the service on Good Friday – were not only spiritually uplifting but provided much food for thought.

San Juan is a city of about a half million people on the north coast of Puerto Rico overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Like any city its size, it is rather a polyglot economically. Unlike most cities on this side of the Atlantic – Quebec being the other notable exception – it is very much a mixture of the modern and, by New-World standards, the very old.

The cathedral is on the main street of Old San Juan, Calle del Cristo. Despite some unfortunate reordering of its sanctuary, it retains most of its beauty, as also have Calle del Cristo and the other hilly, cobbled streets surrounding the cathedral.

### Good Friday made real

The archbishop of San Juan conducted the hour and half long Via Crucis through those streets followed by a procession of several hundred people, with hundreds more as onlookers.

Leading the procession were three men, one representing Christ Himself and the others representing the two thieves that were crucified with Him. All were in realistic dress and made to look as if they had been scourged. They were accompanied by a small group of other actors for the moment – centurions with whips, the Virgin Mary and women of Jerusalem, Simon of Cyrene, and other members of the original cosmic drama.

The last four stations were at the cathedral. All three men stripped to cloths girding their loins were raised on wooden crosses on the cathedral steps, their hands holding rope loops. The man representing Christ's reenacted His death on the cross convincingly. The crowd were totally hushed.

Think Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," but this time live rather than in the cinema, and you will get the picture. Good Friday made very real.

### Noble simplicity?

Recalling that experience a few days later, I was struck by the contrast between it and what Catholics have been told our sacred liturgy ought to be about. The catch phrase in the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* was "noble simplicity."

The Consilium, the group that engineered the liturgical changes, interpreted that phrase as a mandate to strip the Mass bare and to pare away anything that they and other liturgists regarded as an unnecessary accretion. Popular devotions like novenas, benediction and processions, including the Via Crucis, were regarded by the reformers as distractions, to be relegated to the dustbin.

The result of all of this, Catholics were told, would be a greater appreciation for and understanding of the liturgy on the part of all – laity, clergy and religious alike.

That proved to be an abysmally poor forecast. Seminaries in most countries, if not already closed, are near empty, many religious orders are shadows of their former selves, and churches and other property are being sold off.

The laity, moreover, display an increasing indifference to the Mass. We see this in data in Mass attendance. I have collected such data for thirteen countries. The message in these data is clear. Mass attendance throughout the Western World – both old and new – has plummeted since Vatican II. Average weekly Mass attendance in the thirteen countries combined is now less than 20 per cent. The average decline in the nine countries for which long-period data are available is 35 percentage points. In Ireland, weekly attendance is still much higher than in the other countries – 50 per cent – but it has declined drastically – 41 percentage points from 1974 until 2003.

The blame for this debacle, according to Pope Benedict, lies in the liturgical changes themselves and how they were implemented. In his memoirs, he writes (*Milestones*, pp. 148-49):

I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy, which at times has even come to be conceived of *etsi Deus non daretur*; in that it is a matter of indifference whether or not God exists and whether or not he speaks to us and hears us.

In place of the slow organic growth that had characterised liturgical development historically, the reformers constructed an almost entirely new liturgy. In so doing, Benedict argues, and in "setting [the new missal] as a new construction over against what had grown historically, forbidding the results of that historical growth, [they made] the liturgy appear to be no longer a living development, but the product of erudite work and juridical authority." (*Milestones*, pp. 148)

This, in turn, has caused considerable harm  
(*Milestones*, p. 148 )

For then the impression had to emerge that the liturgy is something “made,” not something given in advance but lying within our own power of decision. From this it also follows that we are not to recognize the scholars and the central authority alone as decision makers, but that in the end each and every “community” must provide itself with its own liturgy .  
When liturgy is self-made, however, then it can no longer give us what its proper gift should be, the encounter with the mystery that is not our own product, but rather our origin and the source of our life.

The San Juan Via Crucis with its roots that extend back a Spain of centuries ago is certainly not self-made. Its survival, moreover, is clear evidence of the way in which it resonates with the human spirit and provides the encounter

with mystery that Benedict describes.

The one group with whom it does not resonate, I suspect, is the liberal liturgist establishment. Indeed, if it is not literally their worst nightmare, it probably is close to it.

But, as Benedict has written in a similar context, “when we walk our streets with the Lord on Corpus Christi, we do not need to look anxiously over our shoulders at our theological theories to see if everything is in order and can be accounted for, but we can open ourselves wide to the joy of the redeemed. (*The Feast of Faith*, p. 129)

### Bibliography

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