

My Pilgrimage

Chaucer tells that us when nature awakes in April people long to go on pilgrimages. This pilgrimage, however, took place in March, since in 1961 Easter fell on the 2nd April.

That year on Shrove Tuesday, 14th February, I was received into the Catholic church and was shriven: i.e. made my first confession and received absolution. I received my first Holy Communion on Ash Wednesday and so began my first Lent in the Catholic church.

This was well before the reforms of Vatican II. Masses and all other liturgies were still said in Latin, which I understood well enough and, indeed, in those days Latin was more widely taught in schools, both Catholic and non-Catholic. So Lent progressed for five and a bit weeks until Saturday, 25th March, when I joined the Student Cross pilgrimage from London to Walsingham in North Norfolk.

A group of Catholic male students and one or two chaplain priests met at Westminster Cathedral to begin our pilgrimage: as we left we sang enthusiastically to the tune 'Old Hundredth' the Latin hymn beginning: "*Vexilla Regis prouideunt/ Fulget Crucis mysterium.*"

This we sang everyday when we set out in the morning and whenever we set off after a stop.

Although the 'banners of the King' were physically lacking, we did our best to let the mystery of the Cross shine forth as, marching in rows of three, those in the front row carried a wooden cross: two in front bearing the arms of the cross and one behind bearing the foot.

The three cross-bearers prayed five decades or 'mysteries' of the rosary. Then the three in the second row moved forward to take up the cross and pray the next five mysteries, while those who had been bearing the cross moved to the back. Thus the cross was carried all the way from London to Walsingham and the rosary was prayed continuously all the time we were marching.

Along the route we were put up in church halls and the like, but I do not remember now where we stopped that first evening. The next day was Palm Sunday, so before setting out, we attended Mass. I had, by now, attended many Catholic Masses; but this one was a bit different, beginning outside the church with a blessing of palms before processing into the church; at the Mass itself the Gospel reading was replaced with the Passion according to St Matthew with three readers: one chanting the narrative, another chanting the words spoken by the apostles and others, except of Jesus himself, and the priest chanting the words of Christ. This was solemnly done in Latin which we followed in our missals.

After Mass we began our march for the day. Each day, if we seemed to be flagging our cantor would begin "*Kyrie eleison*" to which we responded "*Christe eleison*" as we began a litany. Usually it was the 'Litany of Loreto' when, after the opening versicles and responses, as the cantor chanted the various titles of the Virgin Mary, we replied to each "*ora pro nobis*", distorting the timing of the plain chant to fit the rhythm of our marching. But if the way ahead looked steeper than usual, the cantor chose the longer 'Litany of the Saints' to keep us going; it also kept us awake mentally. While the response to an invocation was normally "*ora pro nobis*", every so often more than one saint was invoked and then the response was "*orate pro nobis.*" Thus we continued on our way towards Walsingham.

Now sixty two years later, I do not remember what happened each day. There are two incidents, however, which stick in my mind before we reached our penultimate stop. I think it was on the Monday evening, after a full day of marching, that where we put up for the night there were nuns who tended our tired feet, saw to blisters and generally made us feel better. Sadly, this did not happen at any other overnight stop.

At the end of each day, we were fairly exhausted and muscles ached. One evening I was crossing a

road, when I became aware of a car coming towards me. My muscles simply seized up; I could not move. Fortunately the car slowed up and one of my colleagues got me out of the way; but it was an alarming experience and has remained in my mind.

On Thursday, 30th March, we arrived at our penultimate stop. I have it in my mind it was at Swaffham; but that is just over twenty miles from Walsingham, which would be five or six hours of marching. The next day we certainly reached Walsingham in time to take part in the Good Friday Liturgy at three in the afternoon. If we began on Friday morning promptly at eight it would be possible; but now sixty two years later I am not sure. It may well be we stopped somewhere closer to Walsingham.

But wherever it was we stopped we joined in the celebration of the Solemn Maundy Evening Mass and I began my first Paschal Triduum in the Catholic church. The ceremonies obviously were not novel to my fellow pilgrims brought up as Catholics; also in the past six decades some of the rites, such as the washing of feet at the Maundy Evening Eucharist or the lighting of the 'Easter fire', have become widely practised in the Church of England and other churches. But I had been brought up in the Church of England which, at that time, still used only the 1662 Book of Common Prayer or its 1928 revision; *all* the ceremonies of the Paschal Triduum were quite new to me.

The Maundy Evening Mass began joyfully as we commemorated the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and during the *Gloria in excelsis*", which had been suppressed during Lent, bells were rung throughout; then after the homily, instead of reciting the Creed, we had the washing of the feet of twelve men, commemorating Christ's washing of the Apostles feet at the Last Supper. If memory serves right, the men were twelve of our group.

Then the Mass took a more solemn tone. At the consecration of the bread and wine, instead of bells we heard the harsh crack of the crotolus, a sort of wooden clapper. After the Mass the Blessed Sacrament was taken in solemn procession to a side altar, called the Altar of Repose, where it would be the object of adoration until midnight, just as after the Last Supper Jesus had retired to Gethsemane with the Apostles. Then all other altars were stripped, leaving the church looking bare.

We did stay for a time watching at the Altar of Repose; but I do not think any of us stayed till midnight, especially if an early start had to be made the next morning.

So on the 31st March we arrived at the Catholic shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham or 'Slipper Chapel', so named because in medieval times pilgrims slipped off their shoes here before walking the last mile to the medieval shrine. Both the chapel and the medieval shrine were destroyed during the reign of Henry VIII; but the ruins of the old Slipper Chapel were bought by Miss Charlotte Pearson Boyd in 1894, restored and given to the Catholic Church.

That afternoon saw us at the Good Friday Liturgy which was very different from anything I had known before: two readings from the Old Testament with prayers followed by the solemn chanting of St John's account of the Passion and Crucifixion in similar manner to the chanting of the Passion on Palm Sunday; then the nine Solemn Prayers, the Adoration of the Cross by clergy and people, and finally Holy Communion.

The next day, Holy Saturday, was a welcome rest after the previous seven days. Late in the evening we went to the Easter Vigil which preceded the first Mass of the Resurrection at midnight. The Vigil was entirely new to me; it began with the lighting and blessing of the New Fire outside the church, followed by the lighting and blessing of the Paschal Candle and procession into the darkened church as gradually the candles of of all present were lit from the Paschal Candle and we listen to the priest chanting the Paschal Proclamation or *'Exultet'*. There followed four readings from the Old Testament, each followed by a prayer, the first part of the Litany of the Saints, the blessing of Baptismal Water, renewal by all present of their baptismal vows and then the second part of the Litany of the Saints. At midnight the Mass began; during the chanting of the "*Gloria in*

excelsis” bells were rung throughout as the veils which had covered sacred images, statues and pictures during Passiontide were removed. The Mass then proceeded more or less normally but, after Communion, it ended with the morning Office of Lauds.

Thus I had completed my first Holy Week and celebration of Easter as a Catholic. We remained in Walsingham that day and I remember that the cross we had carried from London was decorated with flowers. On Easter Monday we returned to London by coach and I made my way home by train.

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