

Notes on a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Specially Prepared for The CARMELITE REVIEW by VERY REV. ALOYSIUS M. BLAKELY, C.P., Vicar-General of Nicopolis, Bulgaria.

BETHLEHEM

During our stay in Judea, Jerusalem was the point of departure from which we radiated to various places of interest in the portion of Palestine just named, returning to the Holy City after each excursion, for rest and for further exploration of the same. Thus, as you will remember, we went to Jericho, the Dead Sea and the Jordan, following upon our initial visit to the Holy Sepulchre, the Grotto of the Agony and the Garden of Gethsemane.

This method lent the charm of variety to our devout sight-seeing, and greatly relieved the monotony inseparable—even in holy things—from a protracted contemplation of the same object, even though under different aspects, and a prolonged sojourn in any one locality, however sacred. I have already told you much that we saw subsequent to our first "hegira," and now I am about to chronicle a second, which shall live forever in my memory as the fulfilment of a life-desire, and the accomplishment of a longing that was with me from childhood, but which seemed, at times, so utterly chimerical, that its realization came in the nature of a shock. I refer to our going to Bethlehem. We had already been at Nazareth, where the great mystery of the Incarnation took place. Now we were about to visit that city in which the Saviour of the world was born. You will not think it childish in me if besides the reflections of maturer years, founded on and inspired by faith, my mind was busy with the days of innocence, when, with my brothers and sisters, I dreamed on Christmas eve of the gifts which the Christ-child was to bring us, and saw in anticipation, as it were, the holly and the mistletoe intertwined in festive garlands about the walls of our "best room," in whose midst rose the traditional "Tree," ablaze with the soft light of countless waxen tapers, and laden with those identical toys, etc., which parental ingenuity and affection had,

by the employment of various diplomatic and non-committal artifices, learned from us, individually, were the objects of our eager choice. And, going further on in life, was it strange that I should now recall how in my eighth year, after having attended one of the first "missions" given in the United States by our Fathers (Passionists)—when, as an "altar-boy," I served mass in dear old Father Gibbs' church,—I was taken by them to our monastery of St. Paul of the Cross, where, after a week's retreat, I made my first holy communion at the midnight mass on Christmas morning? Could anything have been more natural than these thoughts as I found myself drawing nigh to Bethlehem? The day was beautiful, and all my fellow pilgrims were in the best of spirits. We made a joyous company indeed: for the priests of our party were to celebrate mass that morning in the "Grotto," and many of the lay members to receive holy communion. (Bethlehem is interpreted *Domus Panis*—the "House of Bread;" for it was within its walls that the words of Jesus were to meet with their verification: "I am the living bread, which came down from heaven.") St. John, VI. 51. (And we were soon to be nourished with that divine food—"the bread of angels"—in this most favored spot of earth!) We left Casa Nova, in Jerusalem, about dawn; and after a ride of an hour or so—during which we saw the tomb of Rachel (now in charge of the Mussulmans) and "David's well,"—we entered the city, where, some two thousand years ago, Mary and Joseph sought a lodging in vain on the vigil of the first Christmas. Our first halt was at the Franciscan convent adjoining the "Basilica of the Nativity." As the Fathers had been notified of our coming, there was no delay in commencing

* Note—St. Mary's Church, then Lawrenceville, now incorporated with Pittsburg, Pa.