

THE BLESSED VIRGIN.

Father Villiger's Account of His Visit to the Holy Land.

Where did the Blessed Virgin die? Where was she buried? These questions have been often asked. During my recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I diligently gathered many local traditions that have been handed down for centuries. I was astonished and greatly edified (writes Rev. Burcharth Villiger, S.J., in the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*) to learn of the tenacity with which Christians in the East cling to the traditions which date back to the early days of the Church. Historical sites are pointed out to us on mountains or on the slopes of certain hills, on the roadsides or in the valley, or in caves. Not unfrequently these sites are marked by heaps of stones, or by carvings in the rocks—the sign of the Cross is of frequent occurrence—or by stones set in the top of a wall. When parents bring their children to these spots they relate to them all the events for which the place is memorable, and thus historical events are made known and the record of them handed down from generation to generation.

After the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the Apostles, St. John the Evangelist left Jerusalem with our Lady and went to live in Ephesus. Our Lady's life at Ephesus and the preaching of St. John wrought many wonderful conversions. It is said that the first community of Christian virgins was established by the Blessed Virgin in that city. During her stay there, St. James was beheaded on Mt. Simon, St. Peter was delivered from prison by an angel, and Herod, the tetrarch, was punished by death for having allowed divine honors to be paid him. St. Paul and St. Barnabas were preaching with great fruit in the cities of Asia during this time. St. Luke speaks of their labors at Antioch, Lystra, Pergen and other places in Asia Minor.

After his deliverance from prison, St. Peter had left Jerusalem to escape the fury of his enemies, the Jews. While he was absent, disputes arose in Jerusalem and Antioch regarding the observance of the Mosaic law, and its imposition upon Gentile converts to Christianity. The head of the Apostolic college convened a council and designated Jerusalem as the place in which its sessions were to be held. St. Peter sent word to our Lady and St. John and asked them to return to the Holy City for the consolation of the faithful.

Our Lady returned from Ephesus to be present at the Council; after it was over she remained in Jerusalem until her death. Our reasons for admitting that our Lady died and was buried in the Holy City are these:

1. The honor paid her tomb by the various schismatics of the East, all of whom celebrate in their liturgies, the death, burial and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin.

2. Within the Cenaculum on Mt. Sion, a small chapel, now with the rest of the buildings in possession of the Turks, is pointed out by an uninterrupted tradition as the place where St. John said Mass daily during our Lady's lifetime and gave her Holy Communion.

3. The Greek authors testify to the existence of the tradition that our Lady died in Jerusalem. St. John Damascen and Andrew of Crete expressly state that the Blessed Virgin lived on Mt. Sion; that her house was afterward changed into a chapel; that she died in the presence of the Apostles and disciples; that her body was carried out by the Apostles into Gethsemani, that she was assumed into Heaven, body and soul; and her tomb was honored in their day by the concourse of all nations.

Regarding the claims of Ephesus this negative testimony may be cited:

Polykrates, writing to Pope Victor concerning the glories of the Church of Ephesus, is silent with regard to the death and burial of our Lady. This silence can be accounted for only by the fact that the Church of Ephesus possessed no traditions regarding these events.

When in the fifth century, the Empress St. Pulcheria wrote to Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, asking for relics of the Blessed Virgin, he answered: "We can show you our Lady's grave in Gethsemani, but it is empty, for you should know that she was assumed into Heaven." He told the Empress also that he had opened the tomb and had found some vestments and wrappings in which the body had been buried, these he sent her as the only relics he had to give.

To all these testimonies is to be added the local tradition that identifies our Lady's tomb to-day, as it did in the days of the Emperor Constantine when St. Helena, his mother, built a church over the tomb. Portions of this church survived the destruction wrought by Mahomet's officers when they captured the Holy City; "the masonry of St. Helena's work intermixed with the more ornamental architecture of the Crusaders," is still visible in the porch by which entrance is gained to the tomb.

Many beautiful traditions concerning our Lady's death and burial, are still preserved in the Holy Land, and are recorded by the early Fathers and historians of the Church. These traditions tell us that the Angel Gabriel was sent to announce to our Lady the tidings that the days of her exile had drawn to a close and that she was to be united again to her divine Son. The angel presented her with a palm-branch in token of her triumph, gained by crushing the serpent's head.

As of old, when the message of the Incarnation was brought to her, so now too, the humble Virgin answered: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word.*

Then, when the heavenly host that accompanied Gabriel had departed, Mary told St. John, the son whom Jesus had given her from His Cross, and St. John informed the Christians of Jerusalem that the Mother of the Church was to be taken from them.

All the Apostles, except St. Thomas, were gathered in Jerusalem to be present at our Lady's death. We are told that the humble Virgin knelt to receive the blessing and to kiss the feet of these Princes of Christ's Church. After this she consoled the faithful who bemoaned their loss, and promised them her aid in Heaven. Then, when the moment of her departure had arrived, her divine Son came himself to summon her. Bowing her head she repeated His words: *Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit* and breathed forth her soul into the hands of her Creator. "Her death," St. John Damascen tells us, "was painless. . . it was caused by the vehemence of her love whose transports human nature could no longer sustain."

The heavenly song of the angels that came to receive the soul of their Queen, was heard by all those who were present at her death, although the hosts of the Blessed were not themselves visible. During the time that elapsed between the death of our Lady and her burial, the angels continued their song of triumph. The Apostles joined in the sad strain and reverently kissed the feet of the blessed body that had been the tabernacle of the Incarnate God. The Fathers tell us, following in this the ancient traditions, that many of those who were afflicted in body begged the privilege of venerating Mary's relics; their devotion was instantly rewarded, for the blind received their sight and the deaf their hearing, speech was restored to the dumb, and the power of motion given to those who were lame.

When the time for the funeral had come, the Apostles bore the sacred body of their Queen through the streets of the city. All the faithful accompanied them in procession, with lighted torches. A celestial perfume filled the air. When the funeral procession had reached the house of Caiphas, the Jews impeded its progress and insulted those who took part in it. One rabbi had the boldness to place his hands on the bier; the moment they touched it they were separated from his body and fell to the ground. Filled with terror he confessed his fault and begged pardon for it. St. Peter bade him bend down and bring his mutilated arms close to his hands, he did so and the hands were at once joined to the arms. St. John Damascen recounts this tradition and adds that the rabbi became a Christian.

When they had come to Gethsemani, the Apostles placed the body of our Lady in a rock-hewn tomb, the door of which they closed with a great stone. During the time following the burial, they kept watch at the tomb in turns, and the angels continued their heavenly songs about the resting place of their Queen.

At the end of three days, St. Thomas reached Jerusalem. Learning of our Lady's death and burial he besought the favor of a last look upon the face of Christ's Mother. The Apostles wished him to have this consolation and proceeded to the tomb. After praying before it they rolled away the stone, but in place of the body they had buried there they found only the linen clothes used for the burial. An exquisite odor filled the tomb with fragrance. They saw at once that no human power had removed the body while they kept watch at the tomb, and they understood that our Lord wished to preserve his Mother's body from corruption, and to honor it by a glorious life of immortality, before the day of the general resurrection. Thus St. John Damascen speaks and the Catholic Church confirms his words by inserting them in the Breviary Office during the octave of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin.

Following the route of the funeral procession, which bore our Lady's body to the tomb, we pass out by the eastern gate of the city and across the brook of Cedron, over the stone bridge, then turning to the left we see the entrance to a subterranean room in which is the tomb hewn out of a rock. The tomb is opposite the Garden of Gethsemani and near the Grotto of the Agony.

Few structures round Jerusalem can vie with the "Virgin's tomb." It is in the lowest part of the Valley of Jehosaphat. The facade of the building erected over the tomb was greyish white, the stone is worn by the lapse of time. Patriarchal olive trees surround the building which is Gothic in style, the facade, of course, is arched. The outer arch reaches to the top of the building. Within the deep recess of the inner arch is a spacious doorway with square architrave. Entering by this door we descend a magnificent flight of stone steps—49 in all, each step 14 feet wide. Half-way down we are shown two altars in a recess; these altars are built over the tombs of SS. Joachim and Anne, the father and mother of the Blessed Virgin. Two steps lower down on the right, is a similar recess which contains altars dedicated to St. Joseph and to the holy old man, Simeon, who received our Lord into His arms when He was presented in the temple.

Reaching the end of the staircase, we find ourselves in the chapel hewn in the solid rock. This chapel is 90 feet long and 24 feet wide. Looking towards the left we see a small altar which belongs to the Schismatic Copts.

The ceiling is without ornament and is blackened by the smoke of the

hundred lamps that are lighted on feast days. On the right of the large chapel is a smaller one which contains the Blessed Virgin's tomb; the doorway opening into it was about four and a half feet high; the walls above and at the sides of the doorway are covered with rich tapestry. Bending our heads we enter and stand looking upon the spot where the Apostles entombed the body of Christ's Mother. The room in which we stand will contain six persons. Directly in front of us, at a height of about three feet, is the rock-cut tomb. The stone upon which the body rested is now arranged as an altar; the walls around are covered with costly hangings, many lamps burn night and day before the tomb. It is surmounted by a small cupola.

We kneel upon the spot in which the sacred body of the Mother of God reposed in death and we beg her powerful intercession. We ask her to obtain for us the favor sought by all who say the *Hail Mary*, the help of her prayers in life, and most of all, at the hour of our death. She was conceived and lived immaculate had no debt to discharge to death. Imitating her Divine Son in dying, she followed Him in rising from the tomb, and was by Him assumed into Heaven.

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