

## SANTIAGO AND FATIMA

THE EDITOR

**I**T is a promising start to a pilgrimage when, if you happen to be a Dominican priest, you are mistaken for a Swedish freemason. In Sweden, it appears, the ceremonial dress of the higher degrees is white and hierarchic, and the captain of the Svenska Lloyd ship, used to most manifestations of human dress and behaviour, was unperturbed. Every sea voyage is a pilgrimage of sorts, and the Bishop's charge in the rite of ordination finds an unexpected but powerful analogy in the identical interests as to life and death of captain, crew and passengers. Certainly at sea, even in the most comfortable ships, life grows simpler, more compact, and a pilgrimage by water is perhaps nearer to the mood of Chaucer's road to Canterbury than radar and air-conditioning might seem to suggest.

The pilgrimage to Santiago in the middle ages was of immense renown, second only to Rome and Jerusalem, and three large and learned volumes published by the Madrid Institute of Medieval Studies in 1949 provide, with many maps and illustrations, the evidence of its vast influence on the cultural and even the political life of Western Europe. Today Santiago is no longer what it was, but if you have arrived by sea at Vigo (a modern port, white with the stuccoed temples of shipping offices and banks) you travel indeed by an ancient road, circling the long and lovely bay, and the mendaciously-named Rolls-Royce bus that brings you at last up into the hills gives you two hours of penance enough: more concentrated perhaps than any the Wife of Bath ever knew on her way to 'Galice at Saint Jame'.

Santiago de Compostela is a frozen city: but it means much to Spain, and its university is known. Within the cathedral the people pray, and the shrine of St James is never without its watchers. The very tranquillity of the place, the deep calm of this church like a high and cool cave, the ordered loveliness of pillar and portico—it is strangely still after the multitudes and movement of Lourdes; it is a pause before the harsh improvisations of Fatima. For here the shape and accent of pilgrimage remain close to the place as it grew from simple arch and apse into the final

eloquence of a baroque uninhibited and proud. But it ended, and part of the joy of the place is its lasting fidelity to a grace of outward things which the shrines of our time have yet to achieve. Even the cluster of piety-shops about the cathedral have the same restraint: the popular statue of St James you buy is of painted wood, carved and decent, and the medals are cockle-shells still.

Is the good taste, you wonder, a sign that the tourist is a commoner customer than the pilgrim? Or is the distinction not legitimate? And is the Portico de la Gloria, that sculptured dictionary of the whole of Redemption, lovelier perhaps than Chartres, too lovely for prayer? For the simple people pass, and in the hidden chapels there are our Lady of Fatima, the bambino with the Charles II wig and St Anthony in plaster. But St James remains the ruler here; and the great silver bust with the unsleeping eyes is there above the high altar to command the hearts of the faithful still. 'St James for Spain', and Santiago is the monument of a fidelity that brought into being this miracle of stone, this meeting-place for all of Christendom about an apostle's tomb in Galicia, far away in a corner of Spain.

At Fatima close on a million people gathered on a day in October: numbers that even Santiago had never known. To exchange the self-conscious smartness of Lisbon (and, for that matter, the gleaming Scandinavian ship at its berth) for the desolate moorland country where our Lady appeared to three children in 1917 is to experience something of the uncovenanted meaning of faith. It is strange, this vast tarmac flarepath of a holy place, now being accommodated to some of the basic needs of the multitudes who come. It is strange and it is salutary. The place of the apparitions is marked by a small pavilion: it might be in a Midland recreation-ground, with its wooden struts and its air of impermanence. All the morning you have passed the thousands on their way, bare-footed, their lodging and their food in baskets on their heads. And now they walk on their knees, their arms outstretched; they moan, they sing, they pray. In the basilica nearby is the tumult of Masses offered in unending succession; Portuguese soldiers are hammering tent-poles; the booths are busy with trade.

Our Lady appeared in this place, and she spoke of the need of prayer and penance. Here are none of the graces of tradition marked in stone and glass and silver. It happened yesterday, you might say, and all is reduced to what is necessary: a place to pray

and a place where penance may be learnt; on the ground, in the rain, crushed among the thousands.

A quarter-of-an-hour's walk away is Aljustrel, the village where the parents of Jacinta and Francisco, the two children who died, still live. Here nothing is changed, and this patient pair, antique and faithful, weary, you would suppose, of the endless cameras and the same questioning, bring one part of the picture of Fatima into sharp focus. From this cottage the children went out to their meetings with our Lady; this was the road, and these were the parents who saw them go.

In the end the setting matters not at all. Fatima is by human reckoning as unlikely a place for divine intervention as any you might think of. But it happened, and the withered stump of a little tree marks a revolution in the hearts and minds of men that has encircled the world and whose final meaning is beyond imagination.

In the evening, back on the boat-deck, watching the lights of the city grow, Fatima seemed far away, and its message never so near. 'Is it a holy place?' asked the Finnish deck-hand. 'Is it beautiful? Why do you go?'

We sailed next morning, out of the Tagus into the open sea, to meet a swell that for a day and night was to last beyond Finistère. The rolling grew more compulsive, and the ship was silent except for the noises of the sea and of the means that sailors use to tame it. *Stella maris*: the names of Mary match every need, and a pilgrimage can never end.

## NOTICE

The January issue of BLACKFRIARS will be devoted to 'Some African Problems'. The contributors will include Mgr David Mathew (Apostolic Delegate to British East and West Africa), the Rev. Richard Walsh, w.f. (Educational Secretary General to the Catholic Missions, Tanganyika), Fr Oswin Magrath, O.P. (of the Dominican House of Studies, Stellenbosch, Cape Province), Godfrey Leinhardt (Reader in African Sociology, University of Oxford) and William Fagg (Secretary of the Royal Anthropological Institute and Editor of *Man*). The number will include illustrations of African native art.