

T HE LAST WORD

Utopia

Have you seen the video clip of Abuna (Father) Firas dancing during the Palm Sunday procession in Jerusalem? It was absolutely lovely! The scene of hundreds of pilgrims next to him along with local Palestinians carrying palm branches and trying to follow the Franciscan priest's spontaneous dance steps was simply surreal. Everybody's face was painted with utter joy. With thousands of pilgrims and centuries-old religious ceremonies almost around the clock, Jerusalem comes alive again during Passion Week and Easter. Palm Sunday commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Two thousand years later, the tradition continues. This is, after all, the Holy Land, where Christianity began.

The Easter commotion doesn't actually end there. For practical reasons, Palestinian Christian churches have all come to an agreement whereby all Christian Palestinians celebrate Christmas according to the Western (Gregorian) calendar, on December 25, and all celebrate Easter according to the Eastern calendar (Julian). Except, of course, for the Catholic Church in East Jerusalem, which insists on celebrating Easter according to its own (Gregorian) calendar. In other words, all the Easter commotion is repeated a month later; short of Abuna Firas' Palm Sunday performance, of course! True the Catholic Palm Sunday is a festive and joyous day, and one that is widely celebrated, but the Orthodox Saturday before Easter Sunday is a day not to be missed, particularly in Jerusalem. The Saturday of Light, as it is called, is the day when the Greek Orthodox Patriarch makes his way in solemn procession to the Holy Sepulcher, where the holy fire comes out of the tomb of Jesus, signaling his resurrection. Within minutes, thousands of candles are lit, deafening bells toll, and everyone shouts "Christ has risen" in many languages. The scene is epic. If you think that two Easters is one too many, well, Palestinians celebrate three Christmases. A couple weeks after the typical Western and Eastern celebrations, the Armenians celebrate their Christmas!

There is more. Politics just *has* to come into all of this. Under the pretext of security (naturally), the past years have seen severe Israeli restrictions on the entry of Palestinians into the Old City of Jerusalem, particularly on the Saturday of Light. Scuffles often take place, and the fun is spoilt. I remember when my sister, who was visiting from Sydney a few years ago, was not allowed to enter the Old City, much to her dismay. Also, Christian Palestinians seize this season to assert their identity as indigenous Palestinians by raising Palestinian flags during events like the Palm Sunday procession, or by chanting for Palestine during the Saturday of Light festivities, or even just by having the local scouts play nationalistic marches.

Never a dull moment in Palestine! With its ethnic, religious, geographic, and historical diversity, Palestine has the potential to be the world's number one attraction. Yet it lacks tranquility. It lacks justice. The other day, my 13-year-old had an assignment to write about a utopian place. She could have very well written about Palestine had conditions been different. *Ya khsara*, what a shame!

Sani P. Meo
Publisher

