

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Where Life And Death Contend

Christmas has its own atmosphere: think of the industry that sells it, in garlands, baubles, paper, card, bottles, jars, aerosols, wax, meat, bakery, CD's, books, bought and sold in the hope of capturing the exact elusive tang of a feast. What about Easter?

Memory, The Time-Traveller

Holy Week must be the feast of memories *par excellence*: of the most vital memory the earth has to keep: *Earth's chief treasure, one forsaken grave*. But how appropriately our own memories gather about it! I count as one of my own greatest treasures the memory of the Easters I spent in Rome as a student. The roar of that clanging City, always charged at that time of the year with the oncoming spring: the whiff of narcissus, asparagus in the market, the butchers crying lamb; the dawns earlier, the growing warmth of the mornings. In the churches and basilicas, station masses each day, the increasing solemnity of the bells, the concentration in the faces of clergy, the growing gatherings of the faithful. High over our heads endless relays of jets carry pilgrims to the heart of the Church, foreign voices in the sunshine of streets and squares. The character of the City responds to them, the ancient stones having been so near to the heart of the story, to the Fisherman, to the Apostle of the Gentiles. The nearness of Christ to the modern Romans and their innumerable guests suddenly bursts upon you, as you watch an old woman lighting a candle, a little child playing in the sun. It is not difficult, even in such a maelstrom of engines and business, to fall silent, to feel the tension of salvation as it draws the world a little further, through history, to its God. We all have to realize how God meets us in the present moment, not in the future or the past; but that City has its past so clearly present to it, and here people have met God, have celebrated their salvation, and have borne witness to it with their art and building and writing, as well as by the less visible gifts of millions of lives. Easter haunts the Eternal City.

The Nights Of Easter

But if the days of Holy Week have their own atmosphere, how much more the nights! The hush about Holy Thursday, the first of the Triduum, the churches filled with tender shoots of greenery, so redolent of the garden of Christ's agony, as the sun sets, and the darkness gathers which Jesus

warned us to fear. The pouring of water at the washing of feet, the almost unbearable intimacy of the Last Supper, our being in the birthplace of the Eucharist in its upper room: all give us entry to Christ's world, laid open comprehensively to the mystery of God. The darkness of Good Friday night is scattered by the stupendous backdrop of the illuminated Colosseum, as a vast and silent crowd watches the successor of Peter carry the Cross through the fourteen stations. The night of the Vigil is alive with fires in the courtyards of churches and the cloisters of monasteries, as the words of the Exultet ring in these ancient spaces, the voice of the Roman Church proclaiming the source of eternal life to the world.

Mass In The Piazza

The Eucharist of Easter Day, in front of St Peter's, feels as if the whole Christian world is present. Today the Pope looks, and sounds, like Christ's Vicar on earth. I remember the spectacle of the huge bell, as it is stirred slowly into movement by a squad of *sampetrini*, and at last sends its great lowing boom across the City and out to the world: a wordless Gospel, pealing from two tons of bronze over a vast multitude, all praying for the Kingdom to come, for the power of death to be broken for all. Perhaps such memories don't touch the heart of Easter. They are one person's frame of feelings for the greatest feast. I hope you have your own. *Fr Philip*