

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Jerusalem, Our Mother

I find the image of Zion in the first reading today irresistible. I'm probably out of fashion and politically incorrect, but I love the idea of a city. Real cities, of course, are different. They do two things to the cherished ideal: on the one hand they deface it, fall short of it, ruin it. But they alone can also make it real.

Florence

My last trip to Florence was not very pleasant. Our "secret" method of driving in from the Siena road was fraught with road-blocks and traffic-jams, and the growing awareness that we were part of the pollution that strangles the beloved city. No pedestrian smiles on the stationary queues of revving tourists packing his street, and he is surely justified. Once parked, and as ever gratified by the stupendous view over the domes and towers from the Piazzale Michelangelo, we quickly captured a taxi and marvelled at the courage and skill required to descend the switchback streets into the heart of the Oltr'arno, and deliver us to the Pitti with amazing speed. The streets, however, are turning into one long queue of international tourists, gazing out on the monuments with varying degrees of puzzlement, and obediently entering the glitzy shops to be deftly fleeced by Tuscan entrepreneurs. Was it always so? Partly: but the soul of the city seems to have been sold also. The beady eyes of the (sometimes shameless) salesmen does not seem to be relieved by the humanity which still glowed in the Medici bankers or the founders of the great Florentine palaces. The place has become a resource for exploitation. The flowering city has become a tart, whose face and figure are on sale to the highest bidder.

The Soul Of A City

What made Florence great and wonderful in the first place was a miraculous sense of beauty, coupled with a sound faith in the value of human life. These things are the essential blessings for any city that hopes to be great. Such qualities don't come by accident. Put half a million people on the same ground, and you create famine-sized need, a terrifying potential for crime, devastating pollution - in fact, a killing-field - unless there is a real love for humanity, a real skill in managing the needs, and the belief that people are better together - that we can bless one another by drawing close.

Dome and Pinnacle

If a city has this beatific capacity, it has the power and the will to make itself beautiful, to raise its symbolic buildings and to dignify them with glorious qualities. The profiles of the great cathedrals are still unsurpassed in their power to evoke the spirit of place; Florence without the Dome is simply unthinkable. Few who know Florence well, however, will recall the Cathedral square without remembering the small building across the road from the bell-tower, from which a constant stream of ambulances, taxis, and pedestrians sets off throughout the day to fetch the sick, to transport the crippled or the aged, to solve the problems of the poor. The Misericordia di Firenze is the headquarters of a relief organisation in which every Florentine, from Prefect and Mayor downwards, will annually play his or her part; your firm gives you a day off when your turn comes up to drive a car or sort a domestic accident for the old. This memorial of the ancient charity in which the city was founded far outweighs the meaning of the swindling shopkeepers who share the piazza.

Meanwhile, On Alfreton Road...

...the litter stirs in a chill wind of spiritual homelessness, and the latest essay in mean building takes down its scaffolding. Read the words of Isaiah, and hear what the love of a city can mean, where *to his servants the Lord will reveal his hand*. Of such a city I should like to be a citizen. *Fr Philip*