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Close to the Holy Spirit: The Knock Experience

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As I watched Pope Francis's visit to the Knock Shrine on television in the summer of 2018, memories of my first trip to Knock flooded into my consciousness. That visit was soon after I had moved to Galway from the United States. I did not know what to expect, having little familiarity with the history of the Shrine. When I walked onto the grounds of the Knock Shrine, I immediately felt something special about the place. As I strolled around the grounds, sat for Mass in the Apparition Chapel and meditated in the Chapel of Reconciliation, that special something became for me the presence of the Holy Spirit – the same presence that I had felt in my boyhood church: in the sanctuary during service, in my Sunday school classroom, and in the dining hall where all gathered after the service. This closeness to the Holy Spirit brought me to Knock many times during the two plus years that I lived in Galway. I was back living in Galway for a few months when Pope Francis visited Knock. I wondered whether Pope Francis also felt close to the Holy Spirit in Knock. One can hope that he did.

There are other places beside my boyhood church where I have felt close to God. One is Yosemite Valley in California. It is the overwhelming wonder of nature that brings God close: giant granite precipices towering over tall trees, meadows, rivers, and waterfalls. Knock is not a natural wonder. On the surface it is a mere collection of buildings, gardens, statuary, and pathways: human-made things. We are taught that God is everywhere. Yet in Knock and Yosemite the boundary between God and human seems to be exceedingly thin or to disappear altogether. God is not different in these places, but somehow we are more receptive to Him there.

Why is Knock one of these special places? Of course, there was the apparition of the Virgin Mary with St. John the Evangelist and St. Joseph at the south gable of the village church on August

Richard Buck is an independent scholar of consciousness and spirituality, who lived for a time in Galway, but now resides at 1260 NW Naito PKWY, Unit 207, Portland, Oregon 97209, USA.

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21, 1879. That is the originating source of Knock's specialness. But that specialness has been enhanced by pilgrims' visits in the intervening years – who come for prayer and healing or just to bask in the spirituality of Knock. That spiritual closeness has been reinvigorated by the visits of Pope John Paul in 1979 and Pope Francis in 2018. The specialness has been enriched by marble sculptures of the apparition at the south wall of the village church, the glass-fronted chapel enclosing the marble apparition scene, the basilica, the museum and the Chapel of Reconciliation, the high crosses and sculptures on the grounds, and the Stations of the Cross on the hill above the Chapel of Reconciliation. On any given day Knock's closeness to the Holy Spirit is strengthened by the pilgrims visiting the shrine. I have always visited Knock on weekdays when there is no special celebration, so the pilgrim crowd is smaller. Everyone is silent or people speak quietly to one another. Everyone seems to be paying reverent attention to the grounds, the buildings, and the art of the Shrine. The meditative pose of others adds to my perception of the nearness of the Holy Spirit.

THE APPARITION

The images of the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and St. John, the Evangelist that appeared at the south gable of the village church at 8: 00 p.m. August 21, 1879 (and viewed by 15 villagers) is a story universally known in Ireland and retold in numerous ways at the Knock Shrine. The story sets the stage and provides the background for understanding the spirituality of Knock. It gives context to the perception of the Holy Spirit that for me is so overwhelming. Part of this background is also the special place of Mary in the souls of the Irish. Colm Kilcoyne notes that at the time of the apparition, there was a “special Celtic understanding of who Mary was”.¹ In their prayers, Christ was always *Mac Mhuire*—Mary's son. As a Protestant growing up in the United States this strong Marian tradition was not part of my religious education, but I have lived in Ireland long enough to understand the significance of Mary in Ireland, and this for me has strengthened the spiritual significance of Knock.

ART AND BUILDINGS

The buildings, sculptures and other works of art are part of the Knock experience and all enhance its spirituality and closeness to the Holy Spirit. Hegel explains that the purpose of art is “the

1 Kilcoyne, C. *Knock ... and still they come*. Dublin, Columba Press, 2012. p. 27

sensuous representation of the absolute itself”, and therefore, the excellence of art depends on its “grade of inwardness and unity” with the absolute.² Hegel is quite inclusive in what he would classify as art, and it generally would include buildings and landscaping, particularly those serving a ceremonial or liturgical purpose. The art, landscaping, and buildings at Knock exude spiritual and holy qualities that embody the Holy Spirit. The entire history of these objects and of the Knock shrine adds to this embodiment of the Holy Spirit. These objects carry an accumulated subjectivity, which is a collective archive of visual memory and the interpretation of their symbolic significance over time; that is the objects have taken on meaning that grows and changes with their history.³ The impact of these objects at Knock is fostered not only by their spiritual presence for the immediate observer, but by the history of how they came to be and their place in the activities at Knock over the years.

The Apparition Chapel is the focal point for the Shrine. It was erected at the south gable of the village church in 1978. The sculptures were created from Italian marble by Italian sculptor Lorenzo Ferri, who had earlier sculpted the body of Jesus from impressions in the Shroud of Turin.⁴ He modeled the face of Mary after his sculpture of Jesus, but he had difficulty in arriving at an acceptable expression for Mary’s face and he agonized over this for weeks. One day, at the exact time that the representative from Knock prayed for a satisfactory completion of the model at Padre Pio’s mass, Ferri arose from his sick bed and completed the final version of the face in three hours. I am inclined to attribute this to the intervention of the Holy Spirit.

Viewing the sculptures, we see St. John wearing a bishop’s miter, holding the Bible with words from the Book of Revelation written on its pages. Mary is wearing a golden crown. And her hands are held in the way that Jews used for prayer in her time and also practiced by the early church.⁵ St. John has a special place in Irish Catholicism.⁶ Some scholars believe Christianity was first brought to Ireland by Johannine Christians. The gospel of John was frequently cited in the sermons of early Irish clergy. They also used holy wells for baptism and for healing, a theme that is strong in the gospel of John.

2 Hegel, G. W. *Introductory lectures on aesthetics*. (B. Bosanquet, Trans.), New York: Penguin Books, 1993, (Original work published 1886), p. 75.

3 Banerji, D., *Introduction to the visual imagination of India*. Unpublished manuscript, 2013.

4 Bean Uí Cadhain, S. C., *The vision in marble*. Knock, Knock Shrine Society, 1985.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

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THE CHAPEL OF RECONCILIATION

Directly across the plaza from the Apparition Chapel is the Chapel of Reconciliation. The Chapel design was awarded to Irish architects de Blacam and Meagher after a design competition in 1988. J. Olley in an architectural review considered it the physical link of the Apparition Chapel to Calvary, since it is between the Stations of the Cross on the hill and the Apparition Chapel.⁷ The Chapel of Reconciliation was designed to be covered with soil and plantings, and to be seamlessly integrated with the hill behind. The Chapel has no windows except the glass skylight, usually referred to as the lantern: it is a beacon of light in the centre of the building, which is otherwise quite dark. Olley compares the Chapel of Reconciliation architecturally and functionally to Newgrange, the ancient Neolithic structure that is a mound of earth, with a tunnel to a vaulted chamber, where the dead were laid to rest.⁸ The tunnel is so oriented that sun shines through it into the chamber on the winter solstice. Olley observed that although it was a burial place, on the solstice it became a place of rebirth and hope – much like the Chapel of Reconciliation.

Centered at the back of the Chapel of Reconciliation is a mosaic that dominates the chapel. It is lighted from the top by the sky light (lantern) in the ceiling. Sister Angelica Ballan (a nun from Northern Italy) carved the Crucifixion scene and designed the mosaic, which is constructed with tiles from Italy. The center of the mosaic is an oval, white with light brown swirls radiating from the circumference towards the middle. The white oval is surrounded by a multi-colored oval with greens, yellows, reds, browns, and oranges in an abstract configuration. Gold metal spirals ascend from the Crucifixion scene toward the top of the oval. Whenever I visit the Knock Shrine I sit on the bench in front of the Crucifixion carving and the mosaic and concentrate on them. I feel the Holy Spirit strongly in this place. The mosaic is radically different from the sculptures of the apparition; yet, its design is not foreign to Christianity. The oval in the center is reminiscent of the use of colored eggs in the celebration of Easter, which has pre-Christian origins. It also reminds me of tantric art I viewed on exhibition at the Douglas Hyde Gallery at Trinity College. That exhibit featured 70 contemporary paintings from Rajasthan by anonymous artists painted with home-concocted paints on recycled newspapers. They were quite similar in their overall layout, with an oval (usually black) in the center. Some featured solid colors outside the oval

7 Olley, J. 'The redemption of meaning'. *Irish Arts Review Yearbook 1994*, 10, 100-102.

8 Ibid.

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and some used various patterns in bright colors emanating from the edge of the oval. Viewing the paintings, I was reminded of an egg or a womb, objects of birth and renewal. I felt as though I was peering at something ultimately mysterious and fundamental. These paintings in the tantric tradition are used as objects of focus for meditation. To me, the mosaic in the Chapel of Reconciliation performs the same function. It is the focus for my prayers and my meditations. In both cases, the egg and womb shape conveys feeling of spiritual rebirth and renewal. Sister Angelica's mosaic, therefore, gives recognition to the Knock Shrine's connections to other spiritual traditions.

TIMELESS AND UNIVERSAL SPIRIT

I have cited a few of the things that contribute to the spirituality of the Knock Shrine. An analytical treatment of this spirituality is beyond my mission in this article. I end by reiterating how intensely I sense the Holy Spirit at Knock. Each of us who visits Knock no doubt feels strongly about some particular feature of the Shrine. For me, it is the Chapel of Reconciliation. For many, I am sure, it is the Apparition Chapel. Knock radiates a timeless and universal spirituality that indeed exemplifies the Holy Spirit's ubiquity in the world before Christianity, among today's Christians and even among people today who are not Christians.

Knowing God. The strange but important truth is that God's presence can never be immediately transparent, uncomplicatedly available. God has to be God and we have to be ourselves and never the twain shall meet in the same time-space dimension, because this very dimension had to be invented so that we could stand on our own two feet without being reabsorbed into God. So this barrier is our only safeguard as human beings. And it means in turn that we cannot know God directly: there is, there has to be, a secret wisdom, which subverts our natural capacity to know, which is constitutionally incapable of direct vision of God.

— MARK PATRICK HEDERMAN, *Living the Mystery* (Dublin: Columba Books) p.133.