

Homily for the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary

St. Joseph's Neier/SFBRHS

August 15, 2014

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Central Idea: Do your best for the greater glory of God and you will find your reward.

*Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste  
to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah  
and greeted Elizabeth.*

Come with me on a journey.

A few miles outside of Jerusalem, in the hill country that Luke speaks about in our gospel today, there is a quaint little village called Ein Kerem, literally the Spring of the Vineyard. It has a rather controversial history recently, which explains some of the issues going on in the Holy Land today, but I will leave that for another time, another homily.

A pilgrim to Ein Kerem would have to take a trek up a relatively steep hill, long enough to pray the Rosary, which we did in 2012 when I traveled there. When you get to the top of the hill, there is a long, high wall with large tiles from all over the world depicting the Song of Mary, the Magnificat, also from our gospel today, in a multitude of languages from around the world. It is at this moment that it sinks in that this is the very spot where that wondrous canticle originated. You are at the exact place depicted in our gospel, the place of the Visitation of Mary.

As you turn to your left you enter the Church of the Visitation, and you are overpowered by both its magnificence and conversely, it's simplicity. Your eye is drawn to the magnificent frescoes/paintings all around you depicting this gospel stories. On one wall there is the visual depiction of the council of Ephesus, the church council in which declared the Virgin Mary as the Theotokos, the God-Bearer, the Mother of God. As you gaze at that painting, however, you notice something odd and perplexing. Something seems out of place. The scene depicts the Virgin in the middle of picture with people dressed in ancient robes and togas focused on her, offering her respect and reverence. But there is one figure, a solitary man dressed in modern attire. And instead of being turned towards Mary, he is, in a rather disconcerting way, glaring out at us. It is almost as if he heard us come in the church and wants to catch our attention.

The man depicted in the fresco was a real life person. His name was Antonio Barluzzi. And he is the most famous man that no one has ever heard of.

Born in Rome in 1884, the thirteenth child of his parents, Barluzzi was a precocious child who at the age of five was able to create amazing sketches of the churches of Rome. He was a devout Catholic and even sought to enter the priesthood. A couple of things kept

him from that vocation, the death of his father (he had to go to find real work) and the beginning of World War I. He became an engineer. By God's providence and a torpedo that hit the ship he was on, he found his way to Palestine, the Holy Land. Thanks to a shipwreck, a fascinating legacy began. There was started one of the most amazing ministries ever. Antonio Barluzzi did one thing and one thing only, he designed churches. A lot of churches. In fact, when I was in Israel, we celebrated Mass or visited about seven of the churches Barluzzi designed including, the Church of The Beatitudes in Galilee, the Church of St. Lazarus in Bethany, the Church of the Shepherd's Field in Bethlehem, the Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the Church of Dominus Flevit on the Mount of Olives, the Church of All Nations at Gethsemene, the Church of the Flagellation (that means whipping) on the Via Dolorosa (the Way of the Cross) and, of course, the Church of the Visitation in Ein Kerem in which we are standing in our imagination.

Barluzzi's designs were new and innovative, expressive of the events that they commemorate. For instance, at the Church of Dominus Flevit, the traditional site where the Lord wept over the city of Jerusalem, the dome is made up of four tears. The Church of the Shepherd's Field has the look of a Bedouin's tent, the simple dwelling of those who would have watched their flocks at night. At the Church of All Nations where Jesus was in agony before he was arrested, dark purple stained glass windows create an atmosphere of sorrow and mourning.

But the thing that I remember most of Barluzzi is that he accomplished all of this with only the scarcest of resources, bad roads, incompetent help and assistance. He also did all of this for practically no money whatsoever. And even though he was showered with awards and medals for his designs, he never mentioned them, never talked about them, never drawing attention to himself. A humble man. A simple man. A dedicated man. A holy man.

Barluzzi gazes out at us from the fresco in the Church of the Visitation as if to say: What are you going to do for God? We say: We do not have your creativity, Antonio. He replies: God will inspire you as he did me. We say: I don't have the wherewithal, the resources? He replies: Neither did I. We say: What is in it for me? He replies: Eternal life.

What we celebrate this day, that Mary was taken body and soul into Heaven is nothing more or nothing less than what we hope for ourselves when our earthly pilgrimage is complete. What we celebrate today, is that what we are called to do by God are the simple things, the loving things, the life-giving things to share in the life of God.

We look into Antonio's eyes as they gaze on us from the wall and we hope that we are as giving, as selfless, as motivated and as enthusiastic to build up the Church of God here at Neier (Borgia) and wherever we are shipwrecked on this earth.

