

## The Cenacle

It is in the order of necessity that we should have a reasonably complete picture in our minds of the Holy Ones with whom we hope to spend our eternity and who are now shepherding us along our difficult road. Of course I speak of completeness in a relative sense, because it would be impossible for us to know enough about Jesus and Mary. But we must strike towards such knowledge as is to be had. Here I mean more than a possession of the doctrinal truths which the Church teaches us. I add on the meditations and speculations of the religious writers. It would be incorrect to regard this material as mere pious guesswork. It would always possess some foundation of reasonableness and it can play a great part in turning a doctrine into a person. Unless Jesus and Mary are vivid to us as persons it will be hard to love them in a full sense. They were real flesh and blood individuals who lived the common life in a known place at a certain epoch. We must have an idea of the sort of life it was and of the things they moved among and were interested in. Detailed knowledge helps devotion.

In this process we can deduce plenty that we do not know authoritatively. The Jews were a conservative people. Rule and custom shaped their behaviour down into minute detail. Jesus and Mary would be found conforming faithfully to that way of life. By putting together that varied assortment of information we create a living and reasonably justified picture of them. When thought has made this familiar to us, Jesus and Mary are brought to a new dimension in our minds. They become as distinct and close to us as our own beloved departed ones whom we know so intimately.

This effort to depict for ourselves the manner of life of Jesus and Mary must take in their native land and their period of history. To the Jews their country was inextricably entwined with their religion. Its history and usages were really part of their religion. For Jesus and Mary this was uniquely the case. Those things were not merely a stage or setting for them, which in itself would be important, but actually pointed to them and led to them. The Old Testament is full of items which are types and images and prophecies of them. And we may be sure that this divine pointing goes into a depth of detail which will never be fully probed on this side of eternity, even though new lights are constantly being gained.

So we must read up and think about the Holy Land itself. Jesus must have moved over its entire surface. Unquestionably he loved, with every fibre of his being, that territory which his Father had assigned to the Chosen People as their home. So we should in imagination follow in his footsteps and try to look on its places and landmarks with his sentiments, as St Paul urges us to do in all matters.

These remarks, intended to be introductory, have probably led you to expect a travelogue on the Holy Land.

But my purpose is to concentrate your attention on a tiny fraction of that area, no more possibly than an acre in extent; not a city but only a house. It no longer exists. Its history was short. Yet it will forever shine with lustre in the Christian annals. It is known to us as the Cenacle or upper room in Jerusalem in which the Last Supper took place.

The Pasch, established when the Jews were about to leave Egypt, foreshadowed the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Our Lord was now about to celebrate his own final Pasch, which would turn that shadow into substance. As a preliminary he gave a remarkable command to his two favourite apostles. It is quite evidently based on a looking into the future and the incorporation into his plan of what he saw.

The Gospel of St Luke (22:8-14) speaks as follows: 'Jesus sent Peter and John, saying: "Go and prepare for us the Pasch that we may eat." But they said: "Where wilt thou that we prepare?" And he said to them: "Behold as you go into the city, there shall meet you a man carrying a pitcher of water. Follow him into the house where he entereth in. And you shall say to the good man of the house: The Master saith to thee: Where is the guest chamber where I may eat the Pasch with my disciples? And he will show you a large dining-room furnished. And there prepare." And they going, found as he said to them and made ready the Pasch. And when the hour was come, he sat down and the Twelve Apostles with him.'

That opened the stupendous event which we call the Last Supper. The institution of the Eucharist took place. The final act of Redemption began.

The word 'Cenacle' derives from the Latin *cenare*, meaning to have supper. The Cenacle was only one room



of a house. The particular home was on Mount Sion, a name which has entered into a title familiar to us: Our Lady of Sion.

We see from the Acts of the Apostles (1:13) that the apostles had continued to live in that house after Holy Thursday night, through the desolation of Friday and Saturday and on to Ascension Thursday. It was to there that they returned immediately after they saw Jesus ascent from Mount Olivet. The Acts describe the Cenacle as the abode of the apostles and speak of it as a Sabbath day's journey from Mount Olivet. This would be three quarters of a mile to the city all and the further distance to the centre of the city where the house stood.

Who came back? All those who had seen Our Lord depart: the apostles, the men and women disciples and Mary – to the number of 120. This band of fervent believers constituted the Church of the moment. It was a tragically small number considering the many who had listened enthusiastically to the discourses of Jesus, who had seen the wonders he worked, and had perhaps benefited by them.

We must try to bring that scene to life through our imagination. Those people were not just a crowd. They were the first Christians, our spiritual ancestors. Did they march back as a body? Probably not. Such a challenging gesture would seem to belong to the Pentecostal period. But neither were they dismayed and shivering with fear as they were when the Shepherd had been struck. They had seen enough to stimulate them on the human plane. So we must conceive them as performing that purposeful journey in small groups and definitely in a state of exhilaration. They were going back to await the Paraclete. His coming was to be some sort of prodigious happening, on a par

with the Resurrection and the Ascension, but apparently in another order. The Holy Spirit would descend and make everything different. From the way in which Jesus had spoken about it, it was to be a manifestation, one which would inaugurate a new era. They had no doubts as to the certainty of it. Everything the Lord had promised had come to pass. This would too. They went back to fulfil his instruction that they were to prepare for it.

The first business in the Cenacle was the election of one to take the place of the poor prevaricator, Judas. This was done by picking two of the disciples and then casting lots. The choice fell on Matthias who was then numbered among the twelve.

The Lord had said that they must remain in the city till the Power from on high would come on them (Lk 24:49). So we are led to conclude that they stayed in the house.

We are told that they persevered with one mind in prayer. This suggests that they observed a strict retreat. The number of persons in question would seem to us to be too large to permit all sleeping in the house itself. So we might think that many of them went to their own homes at night. Actually there would be no necessity for this, having regard to the simple sleeping needs of the Jews. A space under cover sufficient to lie down, a blanket – that was all that was required. So that if the retreat were what would nowadays be called an ‘enclosed’ one, there would be no trouble providing in the premises for the total number. Pius XI terms it a memorable retreat, the forerunner and model of all retreats, held in the presence of the Mother of God, which polished and perfected the Church for its apostolic work.

Altars were set up. St Peter said the first Mass, as we are assured by St Proclus, the Patriarch of Constantinople and

Hesychius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Thus the same place that saw the emergence of the Eucharist, the anticipated Mass, housed the first ordinary Mass. This thrilling detail shows the partiality of God for order. Those two events, united in his thought, are brought to pass in the one spot.

Nor did that vital sequence terminate its history. There was more to come. For sheer importance that house would rank with that other one in Nazareth. Their roles were kindred. Jesus took flesh in that of Nazareth and his Mystical Body was cradled in the Cenacle. A little house was big enough for Jesus and his parents. A mansion was required for his larger family.

Let us survey that mansion. We should be interested in the details; what took place there has laid its impress on the life of every man. It is declared to have been white. The premises were obviously magnificent, for the supper-room was 50 feet by 30, spacious enough to hold not less than 120. This indicates sufficiently the status of its owner. It was a noble room, suitably and probably richly furnished, as I will seek to show. It opened on to a terrace which would have a staircase of its own allowing access from the outside without having to go through the house.

That sort of room, but of course not of that size, would be a recognised feature of every comfortable home. It would fulfil such purposes as the reception and entertainment of guests, the celebration of feasts, the saying of prayers, the family meals, the laying out of the dead.

A tradition ascribes its ownership to Joseph of Arimathea. He was a very wealthy man, which is the reason why I have suggested that the premises were richly furnished. The gospel seems to hint the same. Always restrained in its descriptions, it is careful to say that the Cenacle was 'furnished'.



Let me add that it would be highly fitting that Joseph, who was a disciple and who gave his own tomb to receive Our Lord's body, should likewise give his home for the Last Supper, for the first Masses, for the descent of the Holy Spirit and after that to be the centre of the Christian life and the seat of government. O happy Joseph of Arimathea!

Perhaps a pleasing legend might be mentioned: that Joseph of Arimathea was that rich young man spoken of in the gospel (Mt 19:21-22) who was called by Jesus, apparently to the fullness of apostleship, but who had not the courage to cast aside everything because 'he had great possessions'. An air of tragedy surrounds that rich man in our thoughts, so that it would be consoling to think of him as having afterwards been given such a favoured part.

The house was a conspicuous one, almost a landmark as will later appear. When did Our Lord's eyes first rest on it? That forms interesting conjecture. Would he, during those three mysterious days when he was 'lost' in Jerusalem, have gone there to inspect the house which was destined to be in the heart of his future plans?

Such were the surroundings in which the disciples waited for the fulfilment of the great promise. And the time? Just as the Passover was the time for Our Lord to suffer, for he was the real Pascal Lamb, so the Pentecost was a meaningful feast for the Jews. It commemorated the dread drama of Mount Sinai where, long centuries before, the Old Law was given to the people of Israel through Moses. Then it was in a storm, lightning raging, and the mountain like a furnace with smoke billowing heavenwards.

There is a striking of the same note in the formal inauguration of the New Covenant, but milder, sweeter.

The disciples were all together in that place. And suddenly there came a sound from Heaven as of a mighty wind blowing and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them parted tongues as it were of fire and it sat upon every one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak with divers tongues according as the Holy Spirit gave them to speak (Acts 2:1-4).

The expression 'parted tongues' seems to indicate that they saw a fiery source dividing itself into separate tongues. This might have accomplished itself at some height, but one constant tradition has it that the Holy Spirit came as a globe of fire upon the Blessed Virgin who was in the centre of the throng, then parting into tongues to sit upon the others. There would be a suitability about this having regard to the eminence of the role assigned to Mary as Spouse of the Holy Spirit, Mother and Mediatrix. The drastic transformation effected in the disciples is known to you. It does not form part of my present tale.

The immediate result of the New Power was the flood of converts. Two sermons brought in 8,000. This increase rendered the Cenacle inadequate. So they assembled in houses in different parts of the city. There according to the Acts (2:42), they persevered in the doctrine of the apostles and in the communication of the breaking of bread (that is Mass and Holy Communion) and in prayers. But the Cenacle retained its primary place. It was the first See of Peter. It was the primitive Vatican. From there Peter directed the administration of the Church. He exercised the authority of Jesus Christ. He solved doubts. He proclaimed infallibly.

From the Jewish custom in regard to meetings for deliberative purposes, we can tell the setting of that



group of 120 persons. St Peter is the presiding person, not Our Lady. Her office was not and is not, that of administrative head. She is mother. She does not preach or command. But she would be honourably placed in the assembly which would be arranged in circular form, all facing towards the centre. The disciples occupy one half-circle. Our Lady is in the middle, the men on one side of her and women on the other. The apostles form the other half-circle; St Peter in the middle of them, directly faces Our Blessed Lady. The setting reminds one a little of our Congress method or of the recommendation for Patrician meetings.

Historians say that St John's house was near the Cenacle but separate. Perhaps it was some sort of lodge or outhouse of the mansion itself, put at the disposal of St John and the Mother of God by Joseph of Arimathea. Strange that her life should thus repeat itself! As a girl she had lived adjacent to the Temple which she served. Now again she lived beside the centre of religious worship aiding the Church. At this time she was about 48 years of age.

Mary was left on earth after her son's Ascension because she had to nourish and nurse the Mystical Body of her son as she had his physical body. Could she not have done this from Heaven as she does today? No, for there was a human mothering job to be done. She had to be the centre point of affection, the one living witness of the early and vital happenings, the main source of information for the Evangelists, the pillar of faith and wisdom.

Moreover it is the divine principle that one begins on earth what one continues in Heaven. To be our perfect mother in Heaven, she had to fulfil that function over men on earth; so that this root would merge into its heavenly flowering.

It would be quite incorrect to imagine Mary at that stage as removed from people, mourning over the past and moping for Heaven, or in a state of contemplation bordering on ecstasy. No, that would not be the behaviour of a mother with children, of the Strong Woman of the Bible. Rather must we represent her as we saw her at Cana that is moving among the faithful, a woman with a job, every inch of her on duty, her eyes taking in everything, not supplanting others in their employments but discreetly supplementing, filling in gaps, encouraging, strengthening.

Though she behaved towards St Peter as one of his sheep, and was the mainstay of his authority, we may be certain that in private he was but her child, leaning on her, needing just what she was able to give him.

At that time there were 480 synagogues in the city. Lost among them the Cenacle escaped observation and hurt at the hands of the Jews. Later, in AD 70, when the Romans besieged and destroyed Jerusalem, their main attack was on the north. The centre of the city, where the Cenacle stood, did not suffer so much. After that the Christians, having nothing more to fear from the Jews, transformed the edifice into a church. Later, when Adrian completely levelled the city, the Cenacle was the only building left standing, according to the testimony of St Epiphanius.

Most likely there is a symbolism in that. Just as Our Lady of Sion stood erect amid the wreckage of Calvary, so everything else had been overturned. And out of each pile of ruins there was to be a renewal of life far surpassing what had been.