



ATHENS AND JERUSALEM: NOT THE CRUCIFIX!

by Bro Mariano Di Vito, OFM Cap.

I believe his name is Hahmed, and a few months back he spoke on television on the difficulties of artisans living and working in holy places, particularly in Bethlehem. Hahmed said he was a faithful and practising Moslem and for generations his family had carried on the craft of carving statues, cribs and rosaries in olive wood, producing objects of artistic merit at prices accessible to pilgrims.

Some words however, of the young artisan struck me. He said that he was ready to carve any sacred representation, and even with great devotion, from the gnarled trunks of olive wood but, and he made this very clear, "Not the Crucifix! This I absolutely cannot and will not depict!" According to his religious belief and that he affirms with simplicity and firmness, God absolutely cannot be lowered to such ignominy, humiliation and misery. God is the All Merciful One, He looks down and watches over all men, and assists us but always remaining the Most High, totally above and beyond us. Anything different to this would be absurd, in fact a scandal and blasphemy! Saint Paul was able to describe this "traditional" understanding of God in clear and simple terms in a letter to the Christians of Corinth: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks

look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1, 22ff.) These two ways of understanding God, that of Jerusalem that emphasizes God's absolute transcendence with faith being man's only possible means to reach Him, and then that of Athens that, on the contrary, lays emphasis on God's immanence and man's autonomy and power of reason, have not only influenced our past history but also conditioned our way of thinking today. These two ways of understanding God, however, both contain truth. They do not exclude each other, but are joined and paradoxically perfected in the cross of Christ, that is in a Love that is not limited to "looking down" on us from the Heavens, but a Love which "descends" to us, assumes our very flesh and willingly gives Himself up to His persecutors and to the humiliation of death.

We glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, these are words that we shall be singing in the coming days, to express what we believe by faith and what our reason accepts and understands in the Christian vision of God who descends to us to bring us Life in all its extraordinary plenitude. This is the good news of the Gospel. God reveals Himself to us through Je-

sus. He brings man salvation and He does this by dying! The radical novelty of this, is that the Son of God to save us descends to us. Salvation is revealed to us by a God who loves us so much as to give up His life for us, and in the midst of sinners so that He is even mistaken as one of them, a thief.

The fact that the Scriptures tell us more about what God did and does for us rather than what we should do for Him, finds a correspondence also in the lives of the saints. Padre Pio as a man of faith and testimony to Christ Crucified with his long experience as spiritual guide and priest, would encourage his spiritual children to express their devotion through concrete deeds and actions. However, he would always first point to Jesus Crucified who should be the beginning and end of all our endeavours. To Love one responds only by love!

Padre Pio's gift of the stigmata, moreover, that made him a reflection of Christ, again shows us the pre-eminence of what we receive from God to what each of us can do for Him.

This Lent may be a time of spiritual fruit if we allow ourselves to be guided, from the depth of our hearts, by the splendid and glorious light of Jesus Crucified, the power and wisdom of God. A splendid and glorious Easter to everyone!