

REFLECTION

Divided Loyalties

by Guillermo de Carndonagh

The two young men worked their way up the narrow road to the cemetery chapel. Far below in the valley the rising sun was washing the domes and walls of the city a golden yellow. Checking carefully that all was as it should be, they cautiously entered the small building with their large and carefully handled packs.

Guided by the light of oil lamps, brooms, and rags soon subdued the collected dust and then candles were lit and two Icons hung. A noise at the door startled them, but joy replaced the shadow of fear, as the itinerant priest slipped in. Like themselves a fugitive from the empires justice and the machinations of the Arian clergy who controlled the churches of the city below.

Soon the small group of orthodox faithful assembled, most residents of the city below who had begun there trek in the false dawn of early morning. It was a hard trek for many, not just the distance and the hill or even the early hour, but rather the separation. The separation from the parish churches where their families had worshiped for generations, from friends of life, long acquaintance from the familiar comforts of their home place.

But they were men and women of conviction, true to the orthodox understanding of the Trinity. They denied themselves the comfort of the familiar in order to worship in spirit and in truth. They knew that their salvation lay not in a precarious balance between the orthodox and the heretic, not in divided loyalties based on sentiment, but rather in an unequivocal support of orthodoxy.

And, two men and a boy broke from the gloom of the hedge row carefully staying below the band of light cutting across the barren ridge top. Quickly finding the gully they sought, they made their way down the slope to the ancient hermit's den of rock. Pulling aside the covering brush they entered the low western door of the small oblong structure. They carefully cleaned the interior as light began to creep through the slit windows above. Then lifting a paving stone they brought out the candles, and lamps and lit them.

A low bird call announced the arrival of another small group including a young man newly back from France. In a short time others gathered quietly in the gloom. First the young man heard confessions, then vesting baptized a few infants and blessed a new marriage. After a brief rest, the young man assisted by an older man dressed the ancient altar and set out the sacred vessels. Retiring to a small side structure he prayed briefly and returning began the Mass. All grew quiet as the sound of hoofs and the jingle of the harnesses and weapons of Cromwell's soldiers rose from the road below.

When Mass was over the people returned to their cottages scattered along the floor of the valley below, and the young priest and his guides melted into the hedgerows and trails of the hills. As the people returned home they passed the churches of their ancestors and the church yards where they lay. The same old priest who had baptized them now conducted the Queen's new service, and many of their neighbors attended, but these folk knew that you could not have divided loyalties and so they risked death in order to worship in spirit and in truth.

And, the car started with a protest and sputter, noisily disrupting the quiet of the early spring morning. As the man drove through the sleeping village and past the village church towards the expressway the car warmed and quieted. His destination was almost an hour away, a church fully across the county in an old and dangerous part of the city to the north. There he would join with others who like himself were dedicated to worshiping in the manner of their ancestors. He no longer attended or supported the village church but rather the distant one where he now worshiped his God. He knew as many before him knew, you cannot have divided loyalties, you must whole heartedly support the community that sustains your faith.