Introduction

It was Palm Sunday, and for once our family had arrived early for Mass—so early, in fact, that we saw our pastor as he was leaving the rectory. We exchanged our hellos and made small talk. I marveled that the parking lot was already full.

"Everybody comes to church on Palm Sunday and Ash Wednesday," he replied drily. "It's the two days they get free stuff."

Catholicism is indeed the religion of "stuff." Ours is the church of ashes and incense, icons and statues, bread and wine, water and oil, incorrupt bodies, and bones encased in glass.

None of this is incidental to the faith. We're not just about spiritual life. We're about the whole person. So matter matters, too. To an amazing degree, matter *makes* the faith as we live it day to day.

And it's always been this way. In the year AD 383, St. Gregory of Nyssa noted that all through the Old Testament God had saved his people by means of *stuff*:

> Moses' rod was a hazel switch—common wood that any hands might cut and carry and use as they please before tossing it into the fire. But God purposed to work miracles through that rod—great miracles beyond the power of words to express [see Ex 4–14]. . . . Likewise, the mantle of one of the prophets, a simple goatskin, made Elisha famous throughout the whole world [see 2 Kgs 2:8]. . . . A bramble bush showed the presence of God to Moses [see Ex 3:2]. The remains of Elisha raised a dead man to life [see 2 Kgs 13:21]. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ*)

The God of Jesus Christ is the God of Israel—the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And it is his custom to get mixed up in the lives and history of his people. In the ancient world, Jews and Christians were

unique in having no patience with myth. God appeared to Israel at specific times—datable by genealogy and dynastic charts—and in specific places. Biblical religion dares us to check its facts.

If the Israelites had a religious claim to make, they provided the provenance along with it. Within the Ark of the Covenant they kept the tablets of the law along with Aaron's staff and some samplings of manna. The early Christians, in their turn, kept St. Peter's bones hidden in plain sight in Rome and gradually accumulated a shrine around their treasure.

Others may call us a "religion of the book," but we're not. We're a religion of the Word, the divine Word, who is utterly unlike our spoken or written words (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 108). Words are made of warmed-up breeze and most of them pass away as soon as they're let loose. But God the Word is "living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12); and God the Word has assumed the material of our world by taking flesh. He has dwelt among us. We call that fact the *Incarnation*.

The Incarnation is the heart of the Christian creed and the point of every Mass. It is the definitive revelation of God. When the Son took flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit, he revealed God's eternal fatherhood. This is how the world came to know God as a Trinity of divine persons and share the inner life of the Trinity through the sacraments.

In Jesus Christ, God "worked out my salvation through matter," said St. John of Damascus in the eighth century. "Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation! . . . God has filled it with his grace and power" (St. John of Damascus, *On Holy Images* 1.16).

The earliest Christians thought of salvation as something tangible and historical:

> What was from the beginning,
> what we have heard,
> what we have seen with our eyes,
> what we looked upon
> and touched with our hands
> concerns the Word of life—
> for the life was made visible;

> we have seen it and testify to it
> and proclaim to you the eternal life
> that was with the Father and was made visible to us.
> (1 Jn 1:1–2, NABRE)

In fact, the "incarnational principle" extends through all of history as individual Christians—and entire nations—come to share divine life through the sacraments. The life that is invisible is "made visible" for us to see. Our Christian forebears give testimony in the things—the material culture, the "stuff"—they left behind.

So when we Christians tell our story, we don't just write it up in books. We preserve the memory in memorials, monuments, and museums. We build grand basilicas to house tiny relics.

This book attempts to tell the Christian story in an incarnational way—through the examination of one hundred objects. Some of these are ordinary household items, and some are priceless works of art. Some are worthless by earthly standards, while others have become industries in themselves, tourist destinations drawing pilgrims by the thousands every year.

Salvation history is history, not myth. It doesn't occur in moments shrouded in mists before time. It doesn't take place on the heights of Mount Olympus, invisible to us mere mortals who live at sea level.

Salvation history is the story of God entering our world, sometimes with flash and dazzle, but most often through ordinary stuff amid the mess of centuries. And salvation history did not end with the close of the biblical narrative. It's not even over yet. The end of the Bible opens out onto the beginning of our age.

God makes himself known and accessible through material things, always accommodating himself to our condition. It is, after all, the condition he created for us—spiritual and material—and the condition he assumed for our salvation.

Since most people tend to think of history in eras, we have divided the chapters of this book into seven groups.

The Church of the Apostles and Martyrs
The Church and the Empire
The Dark Ages
The Middle Ages
Renaissance and Reformations
The Age of Revolutions
The Global Village

We recognize the problems inherent in chopping history up this way. So keep in mind: every era's beginning is arbitrary and artificial, and so is every ending. Scholars debate endlessly about how to frame the narrative of that period. The poet Wisława Szymborska noted that every beginning is a sequel, and the book of events is always open at the middle. That's true. But history is betrayed by its etymology. It's a story, and every story is itself an artifact—the product of artifice. So artificiality is unavoidable, and divisions are inevitable—and helpful.

The history of the Church is, moreover, *your* story. The artifacts you find in this book are *your* family heirlooms, locked in an attic till now, each a revelation of something in your character, something in your heritage, something in the faith you share with millions alive today, millions who have gone before, and millions, presumably, still to come. As Catholics we profess belief "in the communion of saints." In the original Greek, the phrase means the "communion of holy things"—yes, the blessed souls in glory, but also the things of the earth that are made holy by their contact with Christ, in the touch of baptized Christians. This is the stuff of our story. This is the stuff of our salvation as it plays out through the centuries.

The Church *of the* Apostles *and* Martyrs

In the beginning, the Church—and individual believers—needed to focus on very basic matters. How to survive persecution? How to distinguish Christianity from Greco-Roman religion and from Judaism? How to respond to critics? By the end of the first century, the Church already possessed the characteristics, and seeds of the doctrines, that define Catholicism today. Christian identity was strong and recognizable even to nonbelievers and persecutors. Christians distinguished themselves by their moral lives, their single-minded devotion, and their charity.

The star at the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Photo by mtcurado / iStockphoto.com.

1

The Silver Star *in* Bethlehem

This silver, fourteen-pointed star marks the spot reputed to be the birthplace of Jesus. Its inscription reads, "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary." Fifteen candles light the small crypt around it. Every day thousands of pilgrims wait in long lines before crouching low to kiss this spot, whose access is guarded by Catholic and Orthodox monks.

The Grotto of the Nativity lies beneath the altar in Bethlehem's Basilica of the Nativity. Christians affixed the star to the marble in 1717. In the century and a half that followed, it was removed and replaced, and these actions precipitated the Crimean War in 1853.

But the spot was well established long before the eighteenth century. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke assert that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Mt 2:1–16; Lk 2:4, 15). The Gospel of John then assumes that fact (Jn 7:42). The birth took place near a feeding trough for animals (Lk 2:7). That's all that the scriptural record tells us.

The artifacts of history confirm what we see in scripture and then hint at more.

The earliest Christians took special care to remember the actual sites of the major events of the Savior's life: his Passion but also his extraordinary birth. They learned of the sites, when they could, from eyewitnesses (Lk 1:2), possibly even from the Virgin Mary, who "kept these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19, 2:51). They, in their turn, also kept these things in their hearts and pondered them.

The *Infancy Gospel of James*, a devotional work set down in the early second century, notes that Jesus was born in a cave. And Christians in Bethlehem claimed to know the very place. St. Justin Martyr, who was born in Palestine around AD 100, testifies that his contemporaries honored "a certain cave" as the site where Jesus was born. The Egyptian scholar Origen of Alexandria, writing in the third century, confirmed this by his studies and by his own visit to Palestine.

Though the practice of Christianity was illegal—and punished, now and then, by death—pilgrims made their way to the site. In the time of the Emperor Hadrian, the early second century, the Roman authorities built a pagan shrine at the cave, probably to discourage Christian visits. The shrine, honoring Adonis, stood until the early fourth century. With the legalization of Christianity, the pagan grove of trees was leveled and a Catholic basilica raised in its place, funded by the Emperor Constantine.

Later in the fourth century, St. Jerome, the greatest biblical scholar of his time, took up residence in a neighboring cave, and there he conducted his research, made his translations of the Bible, and sent letters abroad promoting pilgrimage to the holy sites where he lived.

Constantine's church lasted until 529, when it burned down, to be rebuilt later by the Emperor Justinian. In the early seventh century, a Persian army invaded the Holy Land and destroyed many churches. However, they left the Church of the Nativity unharmed. According to one tradition, the Persians spared the basilica for the sake of its mosaics depicting the Magi, who were depicted in Persian attire.

The basilica has, since then, suffered abuse by many forces invading, occupying, or just marching through. Yet the grotto has been protected, preserved, honored, and rebuilt by Christians in every age, at great cost and often at great risk. The rock of the Nativity is adorned with silver and still kissed by thousands of prostrate pilgrims each year. Why? Because the site itself—the object—is, like the gospels, evidence for a certain event, a certain work of God, not in mythic time, but in history. "*Here* Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary."

Catholic faith is historical faith. Biblical religion situates itself in real times, real places, crowded with real people—historical figures. As the

historian Cardinal Jean Danielou observed, "The Bible is a record of the evidence for certain events, certain historical works of God: as, the covenant with Abraham, the birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Pentecost."

Certain places and things are objects of fascination for Christians in every age, and so they are objects of our study, our honor and care.

For More

Jean Danielou, S.J. *The Lord of History*. New York: Meridian Books, 1968.

Scott Hahn. *Joy to the World: How Christ's Coming Changed Everything*. New York: Image Books, 2014.

Paving stone from a first-century road in Jerusalem. Photo by Fr. Gaurav Shroff.

2

A Jerusalem Paving Stone

This is a first-century flagstone from a street in Jerusalem. After two thousand years, it still bears the crude outline of a game of chance, cut perhaps by bored children or soldiers.

The stone may also have borne the footfalls of the apostles. And it may not have. But today it is given a place of honor, just for the possibility.

The important fact is that the apostles *did* walk out into the streets of Jerusalem. They didn't stay behind locked doors, within the enclosure of the Upper Room, where they had spent more than a week of prayer in the company of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

They didn't take up a life of reclusive contemplation, like the Jewish sect of the Therapeutai, who dwelt in Egypt. Nor did they retire to the desert like the ascetics of Qumran, who left the Dead Sea Scrolls to posterity.

Filled with the Holy Spirit on the Jewish feast of Shavuot (Pentecost), the apostles entered the streets—and so entered the great stream of history.

They preached in the public places of Jerusalem, where pilgrims "from every nation under heaven were gathered for the festival: Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and . . . Rome" (Acts 2:9–10). The apostles

announced the kingdom and issued a call for repentance, and many people responded and asked to be baptized.

This apostles' first preaching was to Jews who had arrived to fulfill the command of the Law of Moses (Ex 23:16).

But the Jews who heard the apostolic preaching on Pentecost were destined to return to homes, jobs, families, and neighborhoods in distant lands, and they bore the Good News with them.

The apostles, too, would set out in turn to preach the Gospel "to all the world" (Mk 16:15). They could not have chosen a better time to embark on their mission. The Romans had begun to build an international system of roads, unprecedented in history. Under Caesar Augustus, the empire had also suppressed piracy on the oceans and so made travel safer. And a Greek sailor named Hippalus had just recently discovered the trade winds, enabling ships to travel on the open seas from the Red Sea to the Indian peninsula. It was almost as if the moment had been prepared in advance.

It has long been customary for Christians to observe the Feast of Pentecost as the birthday of the Church. From its origin, then, Christianity was in the middle of the street, in the marketplace, in the amphitheaters, at the docks, on the ships, in the common areas of the villages and farmlands. Though monastic movements would later arise and draw individual believers into hermitages and enclosed communities, Christianity has always been, in the main, immersed in the world, changing it from within—changing the hearts of people who walked the flagstones, worked the market stalls, and played games of chance in idle moments.

Nor would Christianity be contained within a single city, country, or ethnic group. The apostles received their commission to go out to all nations, all the gentiles, but "beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47). The mission started with that first rush of footsteps on the flagstones of Jerusalem's streets.

For More

Mike Aquilina. *Ministers and Martyrs: The Ultimate Catholic Guide to the Apostolic Age*. Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2015.

Jaroslav Pelikan. *Brazos Theological Commentary Bible: Acts.* Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005.

The metal grate before St. Paul's tomb. Photo by REUTERS / Alamy Stock Photo.

3

A Roman Grate

This simple metal grate keeps pilgrims at a short, respectful distance from the remains of the ancient tomb they come to honor: the tomb that is the centerpiece of the Roman Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls.

Behind the grate is the stone casket discovered during archeological excavations from 2002 to 2006. The casket was buried beneath the main altar of the basilica, under a marble slab engraved with the Latin words for "Paul, Apostle and Martyr."

After carbon-dating tests on the bone fragments found inside, scientists confirmed that they likely date from the first century AD. What else was found inside the casket? Tatters of costly purple linen—the clothing of emperors—along with bits of incense and gold sequins. These are later additions, however, probably added when the apostle's body was reburied, amid great splendor, in AD 390.

Paul was a man of singular genius, born Saul in Tarsus, a major port and the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia (now southern Turkey). He was a Jew and a Roman citizen. His zeal for his religious heritage must have been evident from a young age, because he traveled a long way to study in Jerusalem with the greatest teacher of his day, Gamaliel.

Saul identified with the Pharisees, a lay movement that promoted strict adherence to the Law of Moses and separation from the Gentiles. Saul believed the "Way" practiced by the followers of Jesus—who were mostly Jews—was a violation of the Law. Their worship of Jesus he judged to be blasphemous; their rejection of ancient custom he found to be treasonous. He emerged as a leader among the Church's first persecutors, negotiating an unusual collaboration between the often rivalrous Pharisees and Sadducees (the latter being the priestly class).

His brilliance and effectiveness must have been obvious to everyone. The chief priests entrusted him with special missions (Acts 9:1, 9:14). Kings and governors recognized his erudition (Acts 26:24–32).

In the midst of a journey to arrest followers of Jesus in Damascus, Syria, Paul had a powerful encounter with the Risen Lord. Temporarily blinded by the experience, he emerged as a fervent disciple.

With his great learning and charisma, Paul soon established himself as a leader of the Jesus Movement, whose members were by then known colloquially as Christians.

Paul saw his conversion not as a renunciation but as a correction of course. He still identified strongly with the people and religion of Israel. But now he was convinced that Jesus was their long-awaited deliverer—the Anointed, the Messiah, the Christ—who would also bring salvation to the rest of the world.

He called himself "Apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:13). He began to use his Greek name, Paul, instead of Saul. And indeed he went out to the shores of many nations. Yet he always began his preaching at the local synagogue and with the local Jewish community. This is the pattern of his apostolate in Damascus, Salamis, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus.

He continued to identify himself, in the present tense, as a Jew (Acts 21:39, 22:3), an Israelite and member of the tribe of Benjamin (Phil 3:5), and even as a Pharisee (Acts 23:6).

He saw Jesus as the Savior common to Israel and the Gentiles, all of whom were in need of conversion (Acts 9:15, 4:27).

He exercised his apostolate energetically, by letter and by personal appearance. He traveled prodigiously, braving the hardships and dangers of both the highways and the seas. More than a dozen New Testament letters are attributed to him.

Paul's stated desire was to go to Rome; and the travelogue of his ministry shows that he was borne there by inner compulsion and providential purpose. Paul's most significant letter, his first in the New Testament canon, is addressed to the Church in Rome.

St. Peter, named by Jesus to be the leader of the universal Church, also made his way to the empire's capital. Both men would die as martyrs in the first Roman persecution, when Nero made Christians his scapegoats after the city's great fire in 64. According to local tradition, Peter and Paul were executed on the same day that summer, Peter by crucifixion and Paul by beheading—the method that afforded him more dignity and less pain, because he was a Roman citizen.

Their bones would serve, in time, as the foundations of great churches. Their martyrdom would serve as a special consecration of their adopted city.

For More

William Farmer. *Peter and Paul and the Church of Rome: The Ecumenical Potential of a Forgotten Perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990.

Margherita Guarducci. *The Primacy of the Church of Rome: Documents, Reflections, Proofs.* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003.