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Afternoon Tea with a Difference

by Lesley Dawson

Meeting for afternoon tea in the Coffee Shop at Notre Dame was a treat after being limited to Arabic coffee with sugar or Coca Cola or Sprite when visiting friends in Bethlehem. It was an oasis of western culture in the middle of East Jerusalem. Much as I loved Middle Eastern culture there were times when I needed to reacquaint myself with familiar things.

Notre Dame wasn't just a coffee shop it was a hotel, too expensive for me to stay, a gourmet restaurant where I had been taken for dinner by someone richer than me, a teaching centre where I had worked, a library and a Gothic Catholic chapel. It had been on the cusp between the Israeli and Jordanian armies in 1967 and its walls showed pock marked evidence of the fighting.

The occasion was made even better by the person I was meeting. Sister Patricia was a Maltese nun who was very pro-British and a good friend. Service at the Coffee Shop was always slow, and we tried to forget that the staff had been educated at Bethlehem University, our employer.

Our time passed very comfortably and before we knew it, Patricia said, "Oh my goodness, I wanted to go to Mass in the chapel here. Why don't you come with me?"

At this point a small American priest came in looking for Patricia, to ask her to read one of the lessons during the service. With a very wicked look in her eye she said to him,

“I am so sorry Father, I have a sore throat. Perhaps Lesley can do the reading today, Father Thomas.”

“What a good idea. I am sure you have done this before in your own parish at home.” Before I could do more than open my mouth feebly, he swept off to the chapel.

I looked at my friend, “why didn’t you tell hm I wasn’t Catholic?”

I knew that most of my Catholic colleagues at the university were very happy for me to take communion in the post-Vatican Two environment of the 1980s. But I also knew that many local priests did not agree with this. I envisaged standing up to read and hearing a loud voice condemning me as of the wrong denomination.

Patricia was giggling like a schoolgirl, “well, we just won’t tell him, will we.”

She coached me in the appropriate time, place and content of what I was to read but I was still worried that I would be found out as an imposter and not at all in the right frame of mind and heart to worship.

We sat near the front of the church, and she poked me when it was the time to read. Somehow, I managed to get through it without making a fool of myself and slumped back in my seat with a pounding heart waiting for a clap of thunder.

All the way through my reading my friend had been clutching herself and trying not to goggle too much. She squeezed my arm, “well done. Read like a good Catholic.”

I don’t remember much of the rest of the service and certainly could not appreciate the spiritual value of the bread and the wine. At the end Father Thomas came to thank me and I waited for Patricia to explain to him what had happened. No accusation, no Archangel Michael with flaming solder appeared and gradually my heart rate went back to normal.

After a stiff whiskey in the bar at Notre Dame I remembered that one of my Palestinian friends had told me one could seldom do a good turn for this lady without thoughts of strangulation.