
THE PORTIUNCLA

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WHEN THE saved hay had reached the crucial stage where it was hopefully turning that essential shade of gold and the buck rake was being finely tuned for the bringing in, our minds would turn to the cleansing of our souls. The annual Portiuncla Pilgrimage of the Franciscans to the Poor Clare Convent in Drumshambo was held in early August and worshippers arrived in their droves. The awarding of an “Extra Sacramental Remission of the Temporal Punishment” also known as an indulgence, brought pilgrims from far and wide.

Drumshambo was only four miles from where we lived, but what a four miles that was by pushbike. The journey itself seemed, in a way, to be an intrinsic part of the “Portiuncla”—an introductory “Penitential Rite”, as it were. We travelled in the “Hilly Road” and boy did that road live up to its name. The pains in my calf muscles from the negotiating of hills, that seemed by times as sheer as the sidewall of our house, were a lingering souvenir of the event. Soon, I learned that the trick was to gain as much speed as possible on the downward slopes, so that the momentum carried you at least halfway up the next hill, if not to the top, where the bike would come to a complete stop and you would have to get down and push or you would go into reverse. On one occasion, I stubbornly tried to keep going up one of the sheerest gradients, my feet digging into the pedals. I heard a shout from my mother who had alighted well behind me.

“Get down, or you’ll break the chain”.

The sun seemed to always make a reliable appearance during those days.

By the time I freewheeled the last steep hill into the town of Drumshambo, my knees were bright red from sunburn.

Sermons were delivered in musically sweet voices by the Franciscan priests. We listened to the urgency of heaven versus the decadence and proximity of hell, while the sun shone gloriously through the multicolour of the stain glass windows. We knelt reverently in front of the Poor Clare altar, my ten year old mind and reluctantly restrained voice, grappling with the incomprehensible concept of the Order’s vow of silence.

Afterwards, we visited the graveyard, where my mother picked her steps gingerly around its congested surface, pausing very often in prayer. Her meditations were interspersed with complicated explanations as to whom each person was and how they were related to her, and consequently, me. All the while, I tried really hard to focus on the job in hand. But my mind was, sadly, elsewhere.

Because from the moment we rounded the corner of the environs of the church grounds, my eyes would strain for what I really wanted to see. While the objective was, in theory, to arrive home with a shining soul cleansed by the receipt of an indulgence, my intentions were, unfortunately, of a much more materialistic nature. On approaching the church, the canvas tops of the stands became visible and my heart would soar. The holding of the “Portiuncla” also fostered the opportunity for a bit of “spin-off” business. A row of at least ten purpose built booths or stands were lined up in pole position opposite the church gates. On these heavily laden stands, were stacked a veritable treasure trove

of religious trinkets and “souvenirs.”

Praying finally finished, I had barely blessed myself when I made a surge forward in their direction. Gratefully, I would observe that my mother had bumped into a friend or better still, her sister, and this distraction would keep her chatting away while I obtained my real indulgence.

An Aladdin’s cave of valuables awaited me. Plastic cameras that didn’t take photos but instead allowed you to peer inside and witness a slide show that consisted either of the stations of the cross in technicolour, scenes at Knock shrine, or a parade of guardian angels whose translucent wings were spread in heavenly arcs. Tiny water pistols, bunches of miraculous medals bearing the imprints of a selection of saints, small leather purses embossed with silver crosses, marble rosary beads that sparkled like diamonds, dazzling holy water fonts, together made up the melange of delights laid out for our temptation.

But my favourite was the jewellery. The finest of multicoloured “Knuckle-duster” rings sat slotted in a cardboard foam-lined tray. As I slid each one on, one by one, I marvelled at the ingenuity of the slit at the back that allowed you to adjust the ring to your own size. Eventually, irritation would register on the seller’s face and I would have to make a decision. My carefully hoarded two shilling piece would be rooted out from the depths of my pocket and handed over and I would head back to my still chatting mother, my shiny jewellery proudly on display.

The day would not be complete without a visit to Paddy Donnelly’s on the High Street. There, amongst the throngs of fellow soul-cleansed worshippers, I gorged on ice-cream, ducked into red lemonade, that sweetened the palate. This was truly an indulgence that sent me speeding home in high spirits, a state of grace and in flying form to negotiate the return journey, on the Hilly Road.