

## A STONE FROM CALVARY



Pilgrims to Our Lady of Cardigan are intrigued by a beautiful Crown of Thorns in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel carved by Harry Comley. In the centre are three nails, and behind them a hammer with a stone set into its head, along with the INRI sign. Incidentally, Harry made it of Welsh oak, which, he says, is harder to carve than English.

There is a story behind it.

Each year I visit Jerusalem. In September, 1988, I stood on the terrace Calvary, to find the altar of the Crucifixion surrounded by shuttering. Naturally I peered through to find out what was going on, and saw that the stone terracing covering the rock of Calvary had been removed. During supper in Casa Nova Hospice that evening I asked whether anyone could tell me what was being done on Calvary. Opposite me was Michael Zygomalas, a civil engineer from the university of Thessaloniki. He said: "The Greek Government has asked me to carry out the work for the Patriarch". It involved removing the terracing behind the altar and replacing it with steel bars, covered in brass, to support reinforced glass thick enough, he said, to support even the Greek Patriarch, Diodoros II, who was a heavyweight in every sense! He was also installing digitally controlled lighting to let pilgrims see the rock.

One day Michael said: "I start work at 7.30. Can you be there tomorrow at that time?" Of course I jumped at the invitation! So next morning he brought me through the shuttering and behind the altar. There I stood, in the very place where our crucified Lord had shed his blood, and where Our Lady had kept vigil with St. John and St. Mary Magdalene. I cannot begin to describe the thoughts, emotions and prayers that flooded my mind. It was awesome.

Millions of pilgrims, many of them saints, had never had the privilege I had just been granted; yet Michael capped it by giving me a piece of stone his work had dislodged from the top of Calvary. It was an indescribable treasure, yet I knew I could not keep it for myself, so when I came home I asked Harry Comley: "Can you carve a Crown of Thorns and set the stone in it?" He said: "Yes; at the back I'll carve a hammer and put the stone on its head. I'll surround that with the Crown of Thorns and carve three nails to close the gap in the centre". So there the stone rests. People come to see it, and many of them slip a finger between the nails to touch the stone.

A piece of the rock of Calvary cannot be had for the asking. Its Greek custodians guard it carefully, or else the whole rock would have long since have disappeared. Our Lady of the Taper in Cardigan is the only church I know to have one.

Incidentally, I examined Calvary carefully that morning and photographed it. It has been altered in the past, perhaps to fix some structure there. It may just possibly have been done by Hadrian, who put a pagan temple over it so as to blot out the memory of Christ. More likely, it was Constantine who did the work, for after A.D. 326 he built an ornate canopy over Calvary and possibly cut into the rock at its edges.

Back home, I told the congregation at Mass how blessed I had been to have stood by the place of the Crucifixion. And then I added: "You are more blessed, for you have the Mass, where you have Jesus himself, along with his sacrifice - infinitely better than standing where it happened". Treasure the Mass!

James Cunnane, 1999