

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Holy Fire

3 Yishay St.
Abu Tor
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Dear Peter,

Legends cling to every part of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, a structure whose repeated destructions, rebuildings, and additions over the centuries reflect the history of Christianity itself. First constructed in the 4th century AD by order of the Emperor Constantine to enshrine the sites of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, it was destroyed by the Persians during their conquest of Jerusalem in 614, rebuilt by the Abbot Modestus in the following decade, destroyed again by the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim in 1009, partially restored by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Monomachus in 1048, and given its present Romanesque form by the Crusader kings of Jerusalem in the 12th century.

At seven in the morning of May 3rd this year, the church's cramped outer courtyard was already nearly filled with pilgrims, but the spiritual heirs of the Crusaders-- the Roman Catholic or "Latin" pilgrims and clergy-- were absent. This was a day of celebration for the faithful of the "eastern" churches alone. Nowhere is the division between eastern and western Christianity more evident than here at the Holy Sepulcher; the partition of the church's various chapels, the nature of the liturgies celebrated, and even the timing of the various ceremonies celebrated all reflect longstanding theological controversies.

This year, the calendar differences were unusually exaggerated. The date of Easter is determined by the appearance of the Paschal Full Moon and this year there was a serious question which full moon it was. The Catholics (and the Protestants, who are also considered "western"), following the Gregorian calendar, celebrated the resurrection of their Lord on the 30th of April. And only now, one day short of four weeks later, the pilgrims and priests of the Greek and Russian Orthodox, the Armenian, Syrian Jacobite, Coptic, and Ethiopian churches were preparing for their own Easter eve ceremonies, according to the more ancient Julian calendar.

A steady, cold drizzle caused groups of those somberly-dressed pilgrims to huddle in the covered entrances of the religious establishments of the various sects: in the Greek Orthodox convent of St. Abraham (where, tradition relates, Abraham prepared himself to sacrifice Isaac), in the Armenian chapel of St. James (brother of Jesus and first bishop of the city), in the Coptic chapel of the Archangel Michael, and even on enemy territory-- on the steps leading up to the Latin chapel of Mary's Agony. Others crowded into the narrow passage be-

tween the Greek chapels of Mary Magdalen and the Forty Martyrs. Yet most of the pilgrims, having to bear or ignore the weather, just milled around on the worn and now slippery flagstones, nervously waiting for the day's unique and miraculous ritual to begin.

I too was unprotected. I was standing in the center of the courtyard when a middle-aged man in a worn black wool jacket emblazoned with pilgrims' badges approached and asked me for the time. I soon learned that he had come on pilgrimage from the Greek city of Mytilene and I also learned that the time of day was not his primary concern. After I told him it was 7:30, he struck up a conversation. Easily identifying me as a stranger, he seemed anxious for a religious debate.

"Are you a Catholic?" he asked me. I shook my head. "I'm a tourist," I answered, hoping to avoid taking sides in the great east-west schism of Christendom. But the man, apparently convinced that my jeans, sportshirt, and digital watch placed me firmly in the camp of the Latins, merely adopted a different approach. "When was your Easter?" he persisted. There was now no point in being honest. I knew the answer he wanted and innocently offered it to him. "Oh, about four weeks ago," I said.

The pilgrim smiled broadly. "Did any miracle happen on your Easter?" he asked me. Again I shook my head. "So why do you think that the Holy Fire comes down only on our Easter?" This time I just shrugged my shoulders. "Think about it," he advised me in a fatherly tone, "when you see the Holy Fire today."

* * *

The annual miracle of the Descent of the Holy Fire in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem has, since its formalization in the 9th century AD, attracted the interest and attention of supporters and skeptics alike. It has also been one of the most controversial elements in the east-west theological debate. According to the Russian Orthodox Abbot Daniel, who witnessed the ceremony in 1106, "no one (who has not been there) can experience the kind of joy that invades the heart of every Christian at that moment when they see the Holy Light of God." Almost six hundred years later, in 1697, a westerner named Henry Maundrell, chaplain of the English Levant Company, had a quite different impression. He reported that "Bedlam itself never saw such an unruly transport as was produced in the mob at this sight." And in 1864, another Englishman, Captain Charles Wilson of the Royal Engineers, was even blunter. He called the Ceremony of the Holy Fire "probably the most offensive imposture to be found in the world."

These travelers' accounts-- and there are dozens more that survive-- give some sense of the controversy that has long surrounded the unique ritual that takes place in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher every year on the day before Easter, "Holy Saturday" according to the eastern ecclesiastical calendar. It is then that the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem, accompanied by the Armenian bishop, enters the small, enclosed marble shrine said to cover the remains of Jesus' tomb. Standing there in the darkness, they receive a flame reported to be of heavenly origin, a supernatural sign of the resurrection that occurred at this spot. And when the patriarch and the bishop emerge from the tomb with flaming torches in hand, the pilgrims massed outside eagerly share

in the miracle, illuminating their own candles and lanterns with the brightness of the Holy Fire.

Sometimes, this event has possessed great significance even for non-Christian observers. The 11th-century Muslim astronomer and naturalist Reihan al-Biruni, for example, recorded the belief then common among Palestinian farmers that if the fire descended around midday, the country's harvest would be abundant. If it did not appear until evening, a famine would ensue. And on one notable occasion, an even worse event happened. In 1100, the first year of the Crusader conquest of the Holy Land, when the Latin clergy impetuously ousted the Greeks and the Armenians as the main actors in the drama, there was no Holy Fire at all.

Bad feelings were inevitable, and they have persisted in one form or another to the present day. Although a little experience apparently worked wonders in producing miracles and the fire descended under Latin auspices in 1101 and continued until the reconquest of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187, the mutual suspicions of the two main factions of Christendom could never again be dispelled. With the expulsion of the western Crusaders and the return of the ceremony to the local eastern clergy, the bad feelings-- on the western side-- eventually became accusations of outright heresy. In 1238, Pope Gregory IX issued a bull that henceforth prohibited Roman Catholic participation in the Holy Fire Ceremony in Jerusalem, a rite that he now openly branded as a fraud.

The calendar differences of the eastern and western churches eventually made the western rejection of the Holy Fire ceremony irreversible. With the adoption of the Gregorian calendar by the Roman Catholic Church in 1562, its Easter and that of the Greeks, Russians, Armenians, Syrians, Copts, and Ethiopians, who clung to the Julian calendar, parted ways for all times. And although the Catholics maintained an official presence in the Holy Land through the agency of the Franciscan order, it was only the local eastern churches who maintained their faith in the spiritual value of the Holy Fire.

And this was the source of my interest. The eastern churches' observance of the ancient Julian calendar (the Roman calendar used at the time of Jesus' crucifixion) and their devotion to the Ceremony of the Holy Fire seemed to be living archaeological relics. And unlike the pottery fragments, collapsed walls, and buried floor levels that are the conventional tools of archaeological reconstruction, the spectacle-- or miracle of the Holy Fire would, I hoped, offer at least a fleeting glimpse of the faith and emotion of antiquity. That's why I joined the pilgrims in the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on the morning of Holy Saturday. But as I was to learn, my participation made those archaeological abstractions irrelevant. One pilgrim is much like every other on the day of the Holy Fire.

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By 8 AM, the rain had stopped, the crowd completely filled the courtyard, and a ripple of excited sighs and laughter indicated that the ceremonies were about to begin. Pressing forward against police barricades, the pilgrims clutched their bundled candles tightly as two red-fezzed kawasses, honorary escorts and bodyguards, marched smartly side-by-side toward the closed wooden doors of the church entrance, stamping their silver-tipped staffs on the pavement to clear the way for the Armenian patriarch.

The Armenian patriarch, His Beatitude Yeghishe Derderian, followed at an appropriately casual pace, accompanied by a retinue of clergy who were, like him, dressed in flowing black robes with sharply peaked hoods. And in their midst was an unlikely figure: a man of slight stature, dressed in a grey suit and red tie, who proudly carried a large iron key.

This, too, was part of the tradition. Since 1289 and the final Muslim reconquest of Jerusalem, the authority for opening the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has rested in Muslim hands. And since the Egyptian occupation of Palestine in the 19th century, the authority has been divided between two prominent Jerusalem families: the Judehs retain possession of the ancient key to the church, while the Nuseibehs-- of whom this man was a representative-- have the privilege of opening the door.

On most days the church is opened by anonymous custodians in the employ of the two families, but no ceremony is ignored on the morning of Holy Saturday. The representative of the Nuseibeh family posed proudly with the Armenian patriarch for a local photographer as a shaky wooden ladder was passed from hand to hand from the doorway of the Chapel of the Forty Martyrs over the heads of the crowd. The patriarch's bodyguards then propped it against the closed wooden doors.

Climbing up the worn rungs with key in hand, the official Muslim Guardian of the Holy Sepulcher deftly unlatched the heavy iron lock. A murmur of satisfaction rose from the crowd as the ancient doors creaked inward. And as the metal police barricades toppled to the pavement with a clatter, the assembled pilgrims, now numbering in the thousands, pressed forward in uncontrollable excitement to get inside the church.

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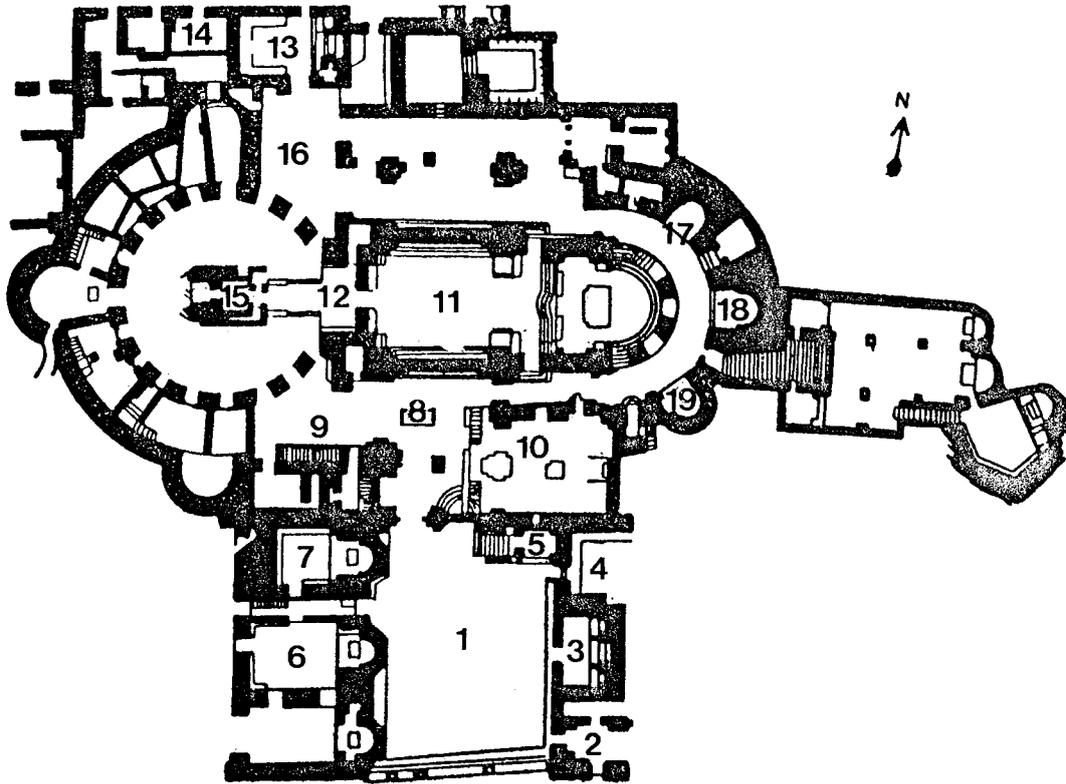
The police and the soldiers stationed in the courtyard had all they could do to prevent a sudden panic. The crush was intense as I was swept with the others into the dimly-lit entrance hall. In these days of terrorism and constant fears for public security, the police in the entrance made some frantic attempts to check the parcels and bags carried by the pilgrims, but hearing the frightened and sometimes angry shouts of the old women and men pressed in the crowd to the point of suffocation, they soon had to give way and permit an unobstructed flow into the church.

There was, in addition to crowd control and security, an even more delicate responsibility entrusted to the Israeli police today. Before the ceremony began, I had watched as the commander of the police detachment went over a carefully marked map of the church with the representatives of the various religious communities. The map delineated the intricate subdivision of the church's shrines, aisles, chapels, even walls and doorways, among the three major sects (Orthodox, Catholics, and Armenians) and the three minor sects (Syrians, Copts, and Ethiopians) that have proprietary rights.

Conflicting claims have often led to bloodshed between pilgrims of the various persuasions. The most recent of these-- not long ago by the standards of the history of the Holy Sepulcher-- took place in 1901, when the Orthodox clergy, being persuaded that their rights to sweep the lowest step of the staircase leading up to the Chapel of Mary's Agony were being violated, at-

SCHEMATIC PLAN OF THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER

-- showing places mentioned in the text--



- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Courtyard (Common) | 11. Greek Choir |
| 2. Convent of St. Abraham (Greek) | 12. Latin Choir |
| 3. Chapel of St. James (Armenian) | 13. Chapel of the Apparition (Latin) |
| 4. Chapel of Archangel Michael (Copt) | 14. Franciscan convent (Latin) |
| 5. Chapel of Mary's Agony (Latin) | 15. Holy Sepulcher (Common) |
| 6. Chapel of Mary Magdalen (Greek) | 16. Chapel of Mary Magdalen (Latin) |
| 7. Chapel of 40 Martyrs (Greek) | 17. Chapel of St. Longinus (Greek) |
| 8. Stone of the Unction (Common) | 18. Chapel of the Division of the Rainments (Armenian) |
| 9. Place of the Holy Women (Armenian) | 19. Chapel of the Mocking (Greek) |
| 10. Chapel of Calvary (Greek, Latin) | |

tacked and seriously injured 15 Franciscan monks.

Tensions can erupt at any time in violence and they are not a question only of East vs. West. For the last several years there have been angry encounters around Christmastime between Greeks and Armenians at the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, and the Israeli authorities have tried to make sure that the disturbances do not spread. Since the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, they have inherited the unenviable task of being religious referees, a role previously filled by the early Islamic caliphs, the Fatimids, the Mamluks, the Ottomans, the British, and the Jordanians. And like all the governing powers before them, they must maintain the intricate status quo of privileges, passages, and ownerships in which are enshrined the religious conflicts among the various Christian sects.

To describe the sectarian geography of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher briefly is impossible; just a few examples should be enough to convey the general situation. Immediately upon entering the church, one faces the Stone of the Unction-- the place where Jesus' body was anointed before burial-- a low, rectangular slab overhung with ornate lamps, held in uneasy joint custody by Copts, Armenians, Latins, and Greeks. Even the number of lamps permitted to each community are strictly regulated: 1 to the Copts, 2 to the Armenians, 1 to the Latins, and 4 to the Greeks.

On the left side of the entrance is the Place of the Holy Women-- from which the Virgin and Mary Magdalen watched the crucifixion-- now an exclusive possession of the Armenians. To the right, up a steep flight of stairs, is the dimly lit Chapel of Calvary; in its center is the place said to mark the site of the Crucifixion. On the left side of this spot is an altar maintained by the Greek Orthodox Church. On the right is the altar of the Roman Catholics.

The center section of the church is occupied by an enclosed basilica, commonly called the Greek Choir, in virtue of its exclusive proprietors. Those Orthodox proprietors are, however, under a constant state of siege by their major rivals. To the west is a small vestibule called the Latin Choir and to the northwest are the Catholic Chapel of the Apparition and the Franciscan convent and sacristy.

Farther to the west is the great rotunda of the church, in the center of which stands the Holy Sepulcher itself. It was at this spot, so tradition relates, that Macarius, archbishop of Jerusalem, and Queen Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, miraculously discovered Jesus' rock-cut tomb in the 4th century AD. The remains of this tomb, cut away from the surrounding bedrock, stand sheathed in an ornate marble structure, usually described-- for lack of a more precise architectural definition-- as being in a 19th-century "Muscovite" style. Its present form dates from the latest extensive renovation of the church, largely funded by Czar Alexander I of Russia, after a disastrous fire in 1808. And every day of the year this monument is the centerpiece of three separate processions (the Greeks at 1 PM, the Armenians at 2:30, the Latins at 4) to honor the tomb of the savior whom all the sects at least theoretically share.

I might add that despite the long and bitter conflicts between Greeks, Latins, Armenians, Copts, and Ethiopians for a place in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher-- or perhaps because of them-- most Protestant churches will have

nothing to do with it. Since the middle of the 19th century, most Protestant scholars have rejected the authenticity of all the ancient traditions, preferring either to leave the question of the precise location of Jesus' tomb unresolved, or to adhere to the identification of another ancient tomb, outside the present city walls, as the authentic Holy Sepulcher.

The complex archaeological argumentation on which the rejection of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher rests involves questions of ancient topography, the line of Jerusalem's city walls in the early Roman period, and the reliability of the 4th-century accounts of the "discovery" of Jesus' tomb. But such questions were superfluous on the morning of Holy Saturday. The absence of the Protestants went unnoticed. The standoffishness of the Catholics was accepted with longstanding bitterness. The entire church and all of its subsidiary chapels were overflowing with eastern pilgrims, whose excitement and devotion were proof enough of the site's sanctity.

* * *

Five hours is a long time to wait for a miracle, especially if you're wedged into a crowd of strangers with barely enough room to shift your weight from foot to foot. The description of the scene in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Holy Saturday 1875, written by the British archaeologist Claude Conder, could apply equally to the scene in which I was a participant. Conder observed that the pilgrims were "packed so tightly that it seemed impossible for one more body to be squeezed in. To say that you could walk on the heads of the crowd conveys but a poor idea of its compactness; the whole mass seemed welded into one body, and any movement of a single individual swayed the entire crowd, which seemed to tremble like a huge jelly."

As a part of that jelly, I slowly squeezed toward a place that would provide at least a partially unobstructed view of the ceremony. But for all my efforts I could get no closer than the Latin chapel of Mary Magdalen (a rival to that of the Greeks outside in the courtyard), about 75 feet away from the Holy Sepulcher itself. Pressed around me on all sides were the members of a pilgrim group from Cyprus, each of them-- young and old alike-- clutching the traditional bunches of 33 candles (one for each year of Jesus' earthly life). And beneath the eye level of most of the pilgrims was another level of existence: close to the floor were the frailest old men and women, heads bowed as they slumped on folded blankets and rickety camp stools, silently praying or trying to sleep.

There was now no escape from the ceremony, no possibility of retreat. The entire church was filled with worshippers and the panic of claustrophobia was an emotion that could easily have caused a tragedy. That has, in fact, happened a number of times in the long history of the Ceremony of the Holy Fire. In 1834, for instance, the panic of the pilgrims sparked a grim chain reaction: the Ottoman soldiers standing in a cordon around the Sepulcher felt themselves to be under attack, and in their brutal attempts to beat the crowd away, they caused a stampede in which 200 were seriously injured and 300 suffocated or crushed to death.

I could only hope that such an event, though possible, would not be repeated now. And soon my discomfort and the tension of waiting were dispelled by excitement and curiosity as the pagentry of the ceremony began. At

around 10:30, the Armenian patriarch's procession, led through the crowd by his body guards, entered the rotunda and silently circled the tomb. And after that slow cycle was completed, he retired with his entourage to a place of honor in the Armenian Gallery high above the floor of the rotunda, regally acknowledging the cheers and applause of the Armenian pilgrims standing directly below him.

Next came a cause of celebration for the entire congregation. At about eleven, a procession of Orthodox and Armenian priests, accompanied by the official Muslim guardian of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and escorted through the crowd by a detachment of soldiers, came into sight. Finally reaching the tomb, the guardian, one Orthodox archimandrite, and one Armenian archimandrite separated from the others and mounted the low marble steps. The three men turned to face the crowd and were suddenly bathed in the brilliance of photographers' floodlights.

In symbolic reenactment of the gospel story in which Jesus' tomb was sealed with a stone before the resurrection, the guardian affixed a large wax seal to the closed doors of the Holy Sepulcher, a seal with long white ribbons attached. As in every phase of the ceremony, the status quo dictated every detail now. During the sealing, the Orthodox archimandrite grasped the end of the ribbon that extended on the north side of the entrance and the Armenian archimandrite grasped the one on the south. And when that act was completed and the procession had moved back through the crush of the increasingly excited onlookers, the distant sound of drums and chanting occupied everyone's attention. Heads craned to catch a glimpse of a parade of young men, some riding on the shoulders of others, making its way toward the tomb.

Robert Curzon, the British diplomat and member of Parliament who witnessed and recorded the 1834 tragedy, termed this part of the ritual "a scene of disorder and profanation." I tended to see it in a less unfavorable light. The Ceremony of the Holy Fire is a celebration for the local Orthodox population no less than for the pilgrims, and these young men-- dressed in jeans and T-shirts in contrast to the somber clothing of the foreign visitors-- showed their possessiveness of the site of the ritual by climbing up the sides of the ornate marble tomb.

Others continued to wobble on their fellows' shoulders, laughing, chanting, beating drums, and twirling keffiyehs, the traditional Arab headdresses. Their rhythmic shouting, slowly building in volume, speed, and enthusiasm, had the style of a football cheer.

"Hadha Kuber Saidna! Hadha Kuber Saidna!" they shouted, "This is the tomb of our Lord!" Shaking their candles, pointing their fingers at the shrine now garlanded with their comrades, they soon succeeded in persuading many of the pilgrims to join in their Arabic chant. On and on the cheer continued, reaching a dizzying height of excitement as the moment of the Descent of the Holy Fire approached.

"Sebt en-Nar wa Aidna!" the cheerleaders chanted, "Saturday is the Fire and it's our festival!" "Hadha Kuber Saidna!" the crowd responded. "This is the tomb of our Lord!"

* * *



Entering the rotunda in procession: His Grace Archbishop Isios Behnan Jijawi of the Syrian Jacobite Church (r.), accompanied by a Syrian archimandrite. In the background are some of the processional banners. (Photos courtesy of Garo Photo Studio, Herod's Gate, Jerusalem)

For nearly a half-hour this back-and-forth response continued, but soon after noon the chanting faded away. The young men with the drums and keffiyehs, and those who had led the congregational chanting hopped down from the shoulders of the young men who had carried them, as a procession of dignitaries of the various sects, followed by 13 crimson and gold-embroidered banners, came into view.

The banners, carried by representatives of the most prominent local Orthodox families, bore the images central to this ceremony and to the claims for the site's sanctity: the Virgin, Jesus, the Cross, and the Holy Sepulcher itself.

Even the form in which those images were displayed reflected something of their history. Legend has it that the early Muslim rulers of Jerusalem objected to the carved icons that were commonly carried in Christian processions, and they were thereafter substituted by embroidery. The procession of banners now moved slowly and ponderously, as if history added to their weight. Their bearers snaked around the tomb in three deliberate circuits, during the last of which the crowd broke out in a somber hymn.

There was now nothing left but the miracle, and the crowd, knowing this, suddenly became hushed. The banners wobbled back to the Greek Choir along a path cleared through the pilgrims by the soldiers. The solemn hymn began again when the Greek Orthodox patriarch, His Beatitude Diodoros I, and the Armenian bishop, Sevan, mounted the steps at the entrance to the tomb. The Coptic and Syrian archbishops stood below at a respectful distance, in acknowledgement of their secondary role.

As the Patriarch Diodoros turned to face the worshippers, his outer robe was gently removed by his attendants, revealing a white inner robe embroidered with crosses, flowers, and stalks of wheat. The lights in the church were extinguished. And as the patriarch and the bishop broke the seal and entered the Holy Sepulcher, a forest of candles suddenly rose above the heads of the crowd.

I expected that the culmination would come quickly, but the tension built as one minute, five minutes, seven minutes passed in the darkness. All around me the pilgrims were fervently praying that this year they would not be disappointed. They were praying that the sign from heaven would come. For some reason I looked back toward the entrance to the Franciscan convent, whose members, faithful to the bull of Pope Gregory IX, played no role in this ceremony. In the midst of the tension, their attitude was obvious. A brown-frocked Franciscan friar, with his arms casually crossed over his chest, quietly laughed to himself.

Suddenly a shout of joy rose from within the rotunda. From my vantage point I could see a faint glimmer reflected on the surface of one of the marble columns, polished by countless pilgrims' hands. The crowd around me surged forward as the patriarch and the bishop, still inside the tomb, passed the first flame to the priests waiting by the small oval openings, the "fire-holes," on both sides of the shrine. Slowly that flame grew and spread overhead as it leapt from one extended candle to the next, perhaps not with the "indescribable brightness" recorded by the Abbot Daniel in the 12th century, but still with unquestionable drama-- with the release of the holy tension that had been so effectively built up.

In a moment the Patriarch Diodoros emerged from the tomb entrance, brandishing a blazing bunch of candles in each hand. Many of the pilgrims around me were weeping. As they struggled forward to ignite their own candles, their tears glistened in the blaze that now illuminated the church. The heat, the crush, and the spreading flames were frightening. Could anyone doubt that the Holy Fire had come from another world?

Above, in the Romanesque belltower built by the Crusader kings of Jerusalem in the 12th century, the clanging of ancient bronze bells quickly became deafening. The fire had now spread to the farthest corners of the church, and, as with water suddenly offered to thirsty wanderers in the desert, the worshippers were no longer so obsessed with the fact of its discovery as in drinking their fill.

Ancient accounts of this moment described how the crowd was driven to the point of dangerous enthusiasm, rubbing the Holy Fire on their faces, beards, hair, and clothing, with the perfect confidence that it would wash their sins away. The scene now was more reflective. Most merely stared in silence at the flickering flames of their candles. The more industrious used them to light the lamps and kerosene lanterns that they had brought along on their pilgrimage. And others, less concerned with the living flame than with its memory, snuffed out their lighted, bundled candles, filling the church with the acrid smell of burnt paraffin. The charred wicks would be their precious relics of this day.

In the haze of smoke and air of excitement, rivulets of pilgrims now



The miracle is shared: The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Diodoros I, distributes the Holy Fire.

not history, in the sense that history is necessarily dead. The tears and flames, the controversies and devotion that lie at the heart of this ancient ritual survive only in their constant reenactment. Holy Fire like this, I discovered, cannot be objectively analyzed, classified, or even dated like other, more tangible relics of the past.

turned to make their exit through the crowd. I, too, had seen enough and I joined the moving stream-- pushing and being pushed-- along the dark corridor past the flickering candles of the worshippers still packed into the Greek chapel of St. Longinus, (the Roman soldier who had pierced Jesus with his lance and who was subsequently converted), past the Armenian chapel of the Division of the Garments, past the Greek chapel of the Mocking.

At the end of the long passage around the Greek Choir, the icon-laden Chapel of Calvary was overflowing and the Stone of the Unction, near the entrance, was almost hidden by kneeling supplicants. The miracle of Holy Saturday 1986 was no longer an expectation but the latest link in a long chain of tradition. And as I struggled with the crowd out through the wooden doors of the church into the cool air of the courtyard, I knew that my archaeological interest in this ceremony had been misplaced.

The Descent of the Holy Fire is a part of life,

Best Regards,

Neil