

ON VISITING THE HOLY LAND MONASTERY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GEOGRAPHY

This paper was written in response to the following prompt: Discuss something that struck you about the trip to the Franciscan Monastery. Pick a passage from the Gospel of Matthew in which geographical context is relevant. Discuss how the geographical context is important to understanding what is described in the passage. Imagine setting the same passage in a different geographical context. What would change? Are the differences significant?

Man appears to place particular value in visiting places. Although one can hear various tales of or view pictures of a particular place, there is something special about visiting somewhere that makes the location become much more authentic. Having personally gone on a religious pilgrimage across the Italian peninsula, I can attest that actually having a chance to walk through St. Peter's Basilica or view the bodies of incorruptible saints allows one to more easily grasp the reality of the things that they signify. This odd power behind visiting places is what makes the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America such a blessing to visit; it provides the opportunity to experience, albeit replicas of, the Holy Land. By experiencing the Holy Land, the Gospels become more alive and help one to grasp the awe-inspiring reality that Jesus Christ truly is a person who, at one point, walked this earth.

One aspect of the Monastery that struck me was the artwork in the main church. The paintings around the main church were quite beautiful and provided detailed depictions of important scenes from the life of Christ. However, what is most striking about them is the style of having raised figures on the surface of the paintings. This creates a "popping-out" effect that I had never seen or experienced before. This effect caused me to view the paintings with a heightened sense of realism. Essentially, adding three-dimensional visual effect made the scenes depicted in the paintings much more alive to me. Similarly, the raised effect on the paintings helped to me better grasp the reality that Christ preached throughout Galilee, inspired the twelve Apostles to follow

him, and died on the Cross. The art gave me a sense that I was there when those events happened; this allowed to me to “visit” those places and better appreciate the realities.

This reflection upon the importance of physically visiting somewhere suggests the sheer importance of places themselves. Of course, from such a perspective, this is hardly a new idea. The Gospels themselves frequently communicate important truths about Jesus Christ, not only by the events they describe, but also by where the events take place. One example of this is the Transfiguration of Jesus, which is told in the Synoptic Gospels.¹ The event is significant in itself because at that time Jesus transforms before Peter, James, and John to appear in His full glory as the Son of God. The event itself confirms the divinity of Jesus, while the geography helps to reveal more truth about Jesus Christ. The beginning of the narrative notes that Jesus took the disciples and “led them up a high mountain by themselves.”² With such a context, the fact that “his face shone like the sun” parallels the entire Transfiguration to the radiance of Moses’ face in Exodus.³ The geographical parallel of a secluded mountaintop serves to help signify a connection between the two events. Creating an explicit parallel between the two events serves to show the continuity between Moses and Jesus Christ. Specifically, by relating Moses and Jesus, it highlights that Jesus came both to fulfill the promise of Moses for another prophet and fulfill the role of Moses as mediator between God and man for the entire human race and for all time.⁴ The ability to extract all of these connections is possible due in a large part to the geographic similarities.

If the Transfiguration was to occur in a different geographic context, the parallels between it and the radiance of Moses’ face would be significantly reduced. However, even if the connection between the two events was more ambiguous, that would not change that fact that Christ is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and that He completes several roles. Rather, these truths are made known more easily because the geography helps to illuminate the connection between the life of Jesus Christ and the life of Moses, and thus illustrate how Christ may be understood in relation to Moses. This way of knowing Christ is similar to the concept of visiting places explored earlier. Just as visiting places

helps to grasp the realities that they signify, relating Christ to other figures helps to better understand the multitude of roles that Christ fills.

The excursion to the Monastery and this examination of Sacred Scripture helped to highlight how important it is for man to receive assistance in trying to better understand and appreciate the answers to the higher questions of life. Although we are able to uncover the answers through the gift of faith, that is not enough. We must continue to pray for faith, not only to know the answers, but also for the ability to truly grasp the gravity of those answers and thus transform how we live our lives. Visiting holy places (or their replicas) and examining the interconnections of Scripture may assist in this endeavor, but ultimately only God is able to complete man and illuminate his mind to how much he needs Him.

NOTES

1. *The New American Bible Revised Edition* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Matthew 17:1-8.
2. Matthew 17:1
3. Matthew 17:2; Exodus 34:27-35.
4. Deuteronomy 18:15; Exodus 32:11-14.