

September 25, 2011

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Having returned home, last evening, from a five-day trip to Syria, I am sending this first message to the friends who have been praying for me this past week. Many of these, prior to the trip, expressed concerns for my safety, so let my first words serve to reassure them.

I begin by remarking that at only one point on this trip did I feel the slightest fear for my physical wellbeing. It happened this way: Our little group was conducted into a large room full of scary-looking people, where a security force of more than twenty policemen met us, all of them carrying side arms, and several holding assault rifles. As we walked through their midst, this security force gave our group a careful once-over.

For the benefit of those concerned for my safety this past week, let mention that the room was the gate boarding area of an airport. It was the first day of our trip. The city was Chicago.

From the time we boarded our plane, however, and during the remainder of the trip---in Jordan and Syria---I did not see a single side arm on anyone at all, and I saw only two rifles: one held by a guard in front of the Defense Ministry in Damascus, and the other by the man who opened the front gate for us at the Presidential Palace.

During our entire time in Syria, I saw not a single armed policeman nor---except for that guard at the Defense Ministry---a single soldier. I saw only one military vehicle, and that was near the Defense Ministry.

The only other weapons I saw in Syria were the 10-inch batons used by the local police to direct the flow of traffic in Damascus. Indeed, the only moments of real apprehension I felt in Syria were occasioned by certain extraordinary displays of spontaneity and boldness on the part of its cab drivers.

In Syria our group---together and singly---was permitted to go wherever we wished and to ask any questions of anybody we wanted. There was only one restriction: our tourist agency mentioned two smaller cities where, out of concern for our safety, they could not take responsibility for us. This concern, they said, was prompted by patterns of violence among some of the "criminal elements" active in those cities---not the Syrian government.

Even then, however, we were not forbidden to travel to those two cities; the tourist agency simply refused to take us. (For the sake of candor, I confess that

I was the visitor who ardently pressed them on the point, assuring them that we Chicagoans are impervious to fear. They ignored me.)

Prior to traveling to Syria, I checked out the web page of our State Department, where I was warned that travel in Syria is currently very dangerous. Normally I take such warnings seriously.

Over many years, however, I have done a bit of foreign travel, so I also trust my instincts with respect to safety. Long I walked the dark streets of Athens during a period when there were riots and insurrections throughout Greece. That same year---just after the civil war in Cyprus---I roamed all over that island, as U.N. peacekeepers policed the place.

In Kosovo a few years ago, again at night, I strolled from the south (Albanian) side of Mitrovica to the north (Serbian) side---and back again---without incident. I have walked around, after dark, in the neighborhoods of numerous foreign cities, such as London, Paris, Milan, Istanbul, and Tel-Aviv. In 1973 I was in the Athens airport when terrorists stormed the El-Al customer desk with grenades and machine guns. I think I can recognize danger.

I also know what it feels like to move around in the dangerous atmosphere of a police state. Last year, for instance, I spent a week in Guatemala, where I saw guns galore on nearly every street. At the time, the murder statistics in Guatemala City were staggering. (Father Timothy Ferguson, who spent a year there, followed the murder reports in the newspaper; he told me that 87 women were murdered in his immediate neighborhood during that year, but not a single person was ever arrested for those murders.) Within five minutes of entering Guatemala City, I was aware of danger. Indeed, if I were not a Chicagoan, I might have feared for my life.

So, let me sum up my impression of the danger factor in Syria. On a security scale of 1-to-10, I would give Syria a 9.7. Using that same scale, I would give Detroit a 4, Philadelphia a 6, and Disney World an 8.5.

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