

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. Prague is an ancient medieval City that in recent times became identified with the Velvet Revolution, the peaceful overthrow of the Soviet Regime, and the amazing collapse of the Iron Curtain. It was once also a thriving center of Jewish life until the dark days of the Nazi occupation and World War II. The large industrious Jewish community of that city was almost obliterated by the Holocaust.

In the old Jewish ghetto, there are five synagogues that once flourished. Most of them function as museums today with one or two of them still providing religious services.

I toured most of them. Each of them reflected different architectural styles taken from the popular fashions of their times. They ranged from very simple to extravagantly ornate. All of them followed traditional Jewish customs. The Torah was housed in a revered, prominent place. In the middle of the room would be a table and a podium. There the Torah would be opened, studied and read. Around this sacred space were chairs for the congregation. In the older synagogues they were arranged like the stalls of monks. The setting evoked for me the idea of a library raised to a sacred and solemn purpose. Taking a seat in

the old synagogues I could see how both study and prayer could be melded into one singular spiritual gesture.

I assume that the structure of these sacred places served for more than practical purposes. The reasons were for more than logistical arrangements to facilitate ritual purposes. Like our own churches there is the earnest aspiration to imitate the heavenly court. One comes not just to listen and learn. One comes to be at the foot of the mountain of God, to stand before the Holy of Holies, to be still or even to tremble before the throne of God.

It is curious how our two traditions design our spaces around this same holy desire. Variations of artistic sensibilities as well as distinct historical narratives have created notable differences. Yet, there is still a reverent resonance which takes us both to the same place. The words of Psalm 43 echo off both the walls of synagogues and churches, “Send your light and your fidelity, that they may be my guide; Let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place of your dwelling, That I may come to the altar of God, to God, my joy, my delight.” (Psalm 43.3-4a)

God’s Word when spoken, when pronounced, has the Genesis spark that creates for us a holy space, an awesome moment when the flames of the burning bush can singe our souls and enlighten our hearts. There is also the holy desire that brings

to our joy and delight. This desire to come the God of my delight also hallows these halls made by human hands.

Should we limit such desire to what we do here? This reverential hunt should not be limited to searching for the divine chambers at a fixed address on Sierra Blvd or K Street? This reverential desire offers us the opportunity to build a sanctuary from each occasion for encounter, no matter how humble or how human the moment. Pope Francis speaking at the global gathering of youth in Rio de Janeiro during July of last year, spoke of creating a culture of encounter, “encuentro”, as a protest against a growing culture of exclusion. In the best sense, this culture of encounter is the noble task of building a temple where all can come and know the God of our joy.

