

The Moslim Saint in Toledo Cathedral

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THE main chapel of Toledo Cathedral has one curious feature which is sometimes allowed to pass unnoticed, though it must surely be unique among Christian churches. Amid the effigies of saints, holy bishops, abbots, and Christian monarchs—defenders of the faith—there stands a fine polychrome statue of an Islamic doctor of theology.

This cathedral was not begun until the early thirteenth century; but the memory of the saintly Mussulman was still held in such regard at Toledo a century and a half after the reconquest of the city from the Arabs, that his image was set up in one of the two most prominent positions of honour.

These two conspicuous sites are the two pillars which, with the two others beside the twin pulpits, sustain the vault of the main chapel. The one on the Gospel side has a statue of the mysterious Shepherd of Las Navas—thought by some to have been an apparition of St. Isidore the Farm-Hand, Patron of Madrid—who showed King Alfonso the Good the secret mountain pass that enabled the Christian army to win the decisive victory of the Reconquest at Navas de Tolosa in 1212, and who vanished after showing the path to the leaders; the statue is said to have been made from a rough sketch drawn by the king himself. And in the corresponding position on the Epistle-side pillar stands the Moslem who won the great victory of renunciation and peace.

His name is Abu Walid, and when the city capitulated to the Christians in 1085, he was the chief *alfaqui*, or expounder of the Koran, in Toledo. The *aljama*, or principal mosque, was the Visigothic basilica of St. Mary, which had been converted to Islamic use when the city fell to Tarik the Berber in 719, and had been considerably enriched since then.

When the Saracen Emir of Toledo, Yahia, capitulated to Alfonso VI in 1085, the indispensable condition he laid down was that the Moslems who chose to remain in Toledo should continue to enjoy the use of the *aljama*. Alfonso accepted this condition and pledged his royal word to comply with it, as indeed he did. But this caused deep discontent among the Christians. By what right, some of them asked, could the king allow the Moslems to debar them, in the heart of their own capital, from the church which their Visigothic forefathers had built to the Blessed Virgin, and she herself had consecrated by a miraculous apparition? Were infidels for ever to remain in possession of the sacred pillar on which she had set foot when she brought down the heavenly vestment to St. Ildefonso? The inscription beside it reads, "Let us worship at the place where her feet have stood," and who was the king to sign away their right to do so?

For rather more than a year, Alfonso remained in the city and the treaty was strictly observed. But then he found it necessary to visit his domains in León, and when he was at Sahagún in that kingdom, more than two hundred miles away, the malcontents among the people, led by Queen Constance, and those among the clergy, led by Arch-bishop Bernardo, fixed the day and hour for the coup; and on 29th October 1087, they broke into the *aljama* by armed force, dislodged the Moslems, and restored Christian worship there, with Bernardo himself presiding.

The resentment of the Moslems was exceeded only by the indignation of the king when news reached him that his solemn covenant had been violated; and he was the more infuriated because, first, he realized that the Moslems might well believe him to have been privy to the plot, and secondly, Toledo was not at all strongly garrisoned, and a general uprising of the Moslems might even recapture it. He hastened south by forced marches at such a prodigious speed that he arrived within sight of Toledo, at a village called Magan, only three days after leaving Sahagûn.

Meanwhile, in the city, Abu Walid had restrained the Moslems from rioting by assurances that the royal faith would be kept. On the other hand, the Christian leaders dreaded the heavy hand of Alfonso, and sent out a deputation to Magân to try to dissuade him from his purpose; this attempt merely strengthened his resolve to punish the treaty-breakers, including the Queen herself. Finally, the Moslem leaders reflected that while the king would undoubtedly enforce the covenant, his punishing the violators would only cause more bad blood between the peoples of the two religions; accordingly they went out to Magân themselves, with Abu Walid at their head, and interceded with the king to forgive the offenders, as they themselves were prepared to do.

Alfonso replied that their forgiveness of the offenders was one thing, for which he was deeply grateful to them, but the breaking of the royal pledge was another, and he insisted on punishing that rigorously. And then Abu Walid, speaking on behalf of all the Moslems, solemnly renounced their possession of the mosque, and declared that they all recognized the king's perfect loyalty to his covenant in everything.

The king thanked God that this generosity had made it possible for him to avoid the punishment of his beloved wife and his subjects without violating his oath. Thus, through the *Alfaqui's* prudent, generous and charitable act, loyally supported by his co-religionists, Toledo recovered its cathedral with honour saved on both sides; and from that day onwards the Moslems of Toledo lived in perfect peace and harmony with their Christian brethren, a state of affairs which none could have foreseen when the violation took place, and which the Spanish church, in its office for January the 24th, attributes plainly to divine intervention.

The office for that day—the day after the feast of St. Ildefonso himself—in fact commemorates two separate events: first, the Descent of Our Lady to reward St. Ildefonso for his defence of her perpetual virginity,¹ against heretics, in the year 666, and secondly, the peaceful recovery of the cathedral in 1087.

The office first describes the Descent of the Blessed Virgin, and states that as the date coincided with the feast of the Lord's Incarnation (18th December in the Hispano-Gothic Rite), the feast was transferred to January the 24th, "the day after that of blessed Ildefonso's death, so that the heavenly birthday of that holy father might be the more honoured by the conjunction of the two solemnities.

"On the same date also, "the text continues," as has been handed down to us, after the recovery of the royal city from the Saracens, when Archbishop Bernardo and Queen Constanza had restored the church to God after being a mosque, in the king's absence and in violation of the treaty, the Moors' resentment was divinely allayed; for which reason, this feast was given the name of the Feast of Peace."

So the feast of January 24th commemorates two things: the heavenly reward of the saint for defending the purity of Mary, and the peace between Christendom and Islam in Toledo, which not for nothing is the most Arabic city in Castile.

Today the friendship between the Spanish Christians and the Moslem peoples is strong; and if Spain should ever decide to establish a public festivity dedicated to that friendship, she has it there ready-made: January the 24th, the double feast of the Descent of Most Holy Mary, and of the peace between Christians and Moslems, which has been kept in Toledo, the half-Arabic Castilian city, for eight hundred and eighty years.

And if Abu Walid is today in heaven with St. Ildefonso, as he assuredly is, then he was canonized by the words of Christ Himself: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." The saintly *Alfaqui* stands in his cathedral niche today, not as a mere mark of courtesy but in his own right, by the grace of God, the Clement and Merciful.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

A man engaged in spiritual struggle should not only withdraw from all evil deeds, but should also try to be free from thoughts and ideas (opposed to the commandments and the will of God), and must always be occupied with salutary and spiritual recollections, remaining detached from all worldly cares.

St. Simeon

¹ This doctrine can never be denied by a Moslem, for it is categorically affirmed in the Koran (verse 12 of sura 66, which precisely bears the number of Allâh).