

Sojourn in the Land of the Bible
A Journal of my Sabbatical
January 27-May 14, 2009

Letter Ten
Fr. John Rowan

I am starting to write this letter on Saturday, April 25, 2009. The sabbatical program is winding down, with less than three weeks to go. For pilgrims, an important part of the total experience is going home. What changes have occurred at home while I was away? What changes in me have occurred while away from home? Many of the twenty-nine people on this program are in transition, that is, they are returning home or to the missions with new assignments. The sabbatical was offered to them as a refresher between assignments. So going home for them contains additional questions, additional unknowns. For me returning home is also intriguing. I am beginning my "third age". That is the language of sociology which describes the first age as school and preparation for life; the second as one's family and work life; and the third what may have once been called retirement, but is really not a period of passivity but of new discovery. I hope that this sabbatical has been a useful orientation to my "third age", about which my attitude is very positive.

I have selected the gospel story of Luke 24:13 to organize my thoughts in this letter, because this gospel presents a favorite Easter account, and it has a clear pilgrimage reference: these disciples are "on the road" when they meet the risen Jesus. To enhance its interpretation I present first the structure of the story.

- A. Two disciples are in flight from Jerusalem
- B. They are arguing as they walk along
- C. Jesus walks with them
- D. Their eyes are closed, their dialogue hopeless
- E. Jesus teaches them

Fulcrum vs. 29

"They urged him, stay with us"

- E'. Jesus breaks bread
- D'. Their eyes are opened, their dialogue hopeful
- C'. Jesus departs
- B'. They converse with each other
- A'. They return to Jerusalem to proclaim how Jesus was made known to them

This structure is called "chiastic". If you draw a line from A through E diagonally down the page, and another line from A' through E' diagonally up the page, the result will be an X, which is the shape of the Greek letter chi, thus "chiastic". There is a clear correspondence between the parts of the story above the crux and those below, and the verse that is found in the center of

the X is given a special place in the interpretation, allowing you to focus on a point which may help you understand what the gospel writer intended to say . Here, the fulcrum is when the disciples, having arrived at their destination, invite Jesus to stay with them. This is the point at which the story moves from discouragement to hope.

I learned about using the chiasmic analysis at Georgetown, and in Bible commentaries, but I have never seen it used so elegantly as in the courses here, especially in Fr. Walter Vogel's course on the Pentateuch. I asked Fr. Vogel if the chiasmic structure was an intentional compositional tool of the writer or an interpretative tool of the scholar. He said that this was an excellent question which he did not ask any longer. Perhaps the sacred writer was just instinctively using a rhetorical device for telling stories. Perhaps the storytelling method, rooted in an oral tradition, required a certain skeleton to help the storyteller remember all the elements. Perhaps it was one of the rules of composition similar to the rules for writing a sonnet. Whatever its origins in the writer, the chiasmic structure can certainly be helpful to the interpreter. This chiasmic analysis of the Emmaus story is attributed to the Jerusalem teachers John Peterson, Richard LeSueur, John Bayton and Thomas Rosica.

A. Flight from Jerusalem

Jerusalem is the city of destiny. In Luke's Gospel it is the terminus of Jesus' earthly journey and the place of his departure to God. The disciples in the Emmaus account are leaving the city of destiny; their attitude is seen as one of losing hope. But history shows many flights from Jerusalem, for many reasons, usually conflict and fear. We visited two sites that represent flight, Masada and Qumran.

Masada means Fortress. This fortress was developed by Herod the Great (37 BC – 4 BC) in the Judean desert south of Jerusalem as alternative palace if Jerusalem got too dangerous for him. The fortress was built on the plateau of a mountain with a winding path (the snake path) climbing up what seems an impossible height. Today there is a cable car to carry visitors to the summit, which is how we got there on a recent sweltering hot day. The considerable Herodian architectural skill was applied to the design of the fortress and of its infrastructure, including a clever water supply from springs in the higher mountains as well as a store house for provisions of all kinds. As you walk around the site, which covers several acres, there is a black line painted horizontally on the walls indicating that the stones below the line are original, while those above are reconstructions. The amount and quality of original construction are amazing.

Masada is prominent today not because of Herod but because this is the place where a zealot sect of Jews held out against the Romans in 74 AD. The Romans thought they would have an easy task of it, that they would just have to wait on the plains below until the supplies of the rebels ran out. From the heights you can see the outline of several Roman camps below; 8000 soldiers waited. But the rebels had a huge supply of food and water left there by Herod, and so they were able to hold out, with their wives and families, for a few months. Finally, the Romans, losing patience, built a ramp up the mountain and, using a battering ram, breached the fortress

wall and prepared to enter the settlement. This is how the historian Josephus Flavius, The Wars of the Jews, describes what happened among the Jews on the night before the Roman assault:

“Then, having chosen by lot ten of their number to dispatch the rest, they laid themselves down each beside his prostrate wife and children, and, flinging their arms around them, offered their throats in readiness for the executants of the melancholy office. These, having unswervingly slaughtered all, ordained the same rule of the lot for one another, that he on whom it fell should slay first the nine and then himself last of all;...They had died in the belief that they had left not a soul of them alive to fall into Roman hands; the Romans advanced to the assault...seeing none of the enemy but on all sides an awful solitude, and flames within and silence, they were at a loss to conjecture what had happened. Here encountering the mass of the slain, instead of exulting as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve and contempt of death displayed by so many in carrying it, unwavering, into execution.”

There are problems, ancient and contemporary, with the Masada account. The ancient problem is the question of witnesses. Internal to Josephus' account there is no provision for any Jewish witnesses to the event, since all the inhabitants were slain; and there is no contemporaneous account of this particular siege in the Roman history of the campaign in Israel in 66-74AD. Josephus maintains that two women and five children who had been hiding in the cisterns on the mountaintop told the Romans what had happened on that night, but their account is inconsistent with the story that the executions were carried out within families so that everyone would be accounted for and no one would fall into the hands of the Romans. So, like many other impressive archeological sites, the stones were witnesses to some events about which they remain silent and we can only speculate.

The contemporary issue of Masada is whether the Jewish people really want Masada to be a symbol of their national character. For a while, Masada served to proclaim the message that the Jews did not go gently, without resistance, into the Nazi death machine. There was a reluctance to have the passage from the Prophet Isaiah applied to the European Jews: “Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; like a lamb to the slaughter, or a sheep to the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth.” (Is 53:7) Masada showed resistance and courage in the face of a ruthless enemy. This was an encouragement to Jewish youth that they were not to be a submissive people, but one ready to go to heroic lengths for the sake of freedom.

Now some Jewish critics are saying that the Masada story should not be a model for Jewish resistance and courage in the face of oppression. They suggest that the Jews should remember God's promises to Abraham and Sarah, that God would make them a blessing to the nations, that God would give them descendants, and that God would give them the land. The Masada solution does not make provision for descendants, nor for the possession of the land. Remember that God remained faithful to the Jews during two biblical periods of slavery in foreign places, Egypt and Babylonia. I inquired as to whether the Masada story was discussed as a moral issue in the rabbinic literature, and the answer is that no Masada mention is found there, even though the rabbis were ready to take on any issue that would reflect on the Jews'

fidelity to the Covenant. The absence of the Masada story in rabbinic literature may be due to the fact that the rabbis didn't know of this story, or that they were generally in disagreement with the zealots and their methods, including suicide.

Qumran is another refuge from Jerusalem. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran is probably the most important event in biblical studies in a thousand years. In 1947 a Bedouin shepherd boy threw a stone into a cave and heard the sound of pottery breaking. This was the beginning of the discovery of the scrolls, which I discussed in an earlier letter. They are now housed in a beautiful museum called "The Shrine of the Book" which is part of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. I visited the museum and can report that the display of facsimiles and of pottery and writing materials is very instructive. The scrolls may have been put in the caves (looking up the desert mountainside from the site at Qumran you can see the cave that is designated cave #1, where the boy found the first scrolls) by refugees from Jerusalem who were trying to hide their treasured writings from the Roman crackdown around 70 AD, or may have been wholly or partly hidden by the Essene community living nearby at the monastery of Qumran, which is an archeological site today managed by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

The Essene community was a Jewish sect given to the absolute observance of the Covenant and the Law without compromise. The sect originated during the Babylonian captivity because of its objection to Jewish accommodation to the culture and practices of the pagan Babylonians. In 150 BC, long after the return to Jerusalem, the Essenes found that the observance of the law in Jerusalem was lax and, seeking a pure and undefiled way of life, retreated to the desert where they built a monastery and a way of life that was completely given to the study of the scriptures and to observing the law. There was no hour of the day when the Bible texts were not being studied or copied by someone in the community. It is thought by many that the Essenes were the first mentors of John the Baptist, first, because the severity of John's message of judgment and repentance reflected the tone of Essene teaching; and second, because John's use of a purification bath was very similar to a practice of the Essenes. On the subject of John the Baptist and the Essenes, there are many opinions, as one would expect. In any case, they show the diversity of practice within the Jewish faith through the ages and at the time of Jesus, and make a connection between spirituality and the desert and monastic celibacy which seems to find a place in every religious tradition.

B./C./D./E. Argument on the road; Jesus joins them; their eyes are closed; Jesus teaches

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus describes them as "conversing and debating". (Lk 24:15) Their exchange is not dialogue but argument, and this is an important part of the story, because the corresponding part of the chiasmic design will later have them in enthusiastic agreement. (Lk 24:32) Today, we don't have to look hard to find arguments, and that might be especially true here in Israel, both today and in the past.

The First Crusade called by Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont in 1095 may serve as a symbol of the religious and political rivalries in the east and west and the cruelty and avarice which were practiced by the Crusaders and the Muslims. The western victory in the First

Crusade, despite the lack of cohesion of purpose among the Crusaders, is attributed to even greater divisions and jealousy among the Turks and Arab nations. Meanwhile, within Christianity, there was tension between the Pope and the other four great Patriarchs, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, over which Rome had the primacy of honor but no authority. Here is a brief description of the siege of the city of Jerusalem from Steven Runciman, The First Crusade:

"...the Crusaders had insufficient forces to invest the whole city. They concentrated their strength on the sectors where they could come near the walls. Robert of Normandy took up his station along the northern wall opposite to the Gate of Flowers (Herod's Gate), with Robert of Flanders on his right, opposite to the Gate of the Column (St. Stephen's or the Damascus Gate). Godfrey of Lorraine took over the area covering the northeast angle of the city, as far down as the Jaffa Gate. He was joined there by Tancred, who rode up when the army was already in position, bringing flocks that he had taken on his way from Bethlehem. To his south was Raymond of Toulouse, who, finding that the valley kept him too far from the walls, moved up after two or three days to Mount Sion. The eastern and southeastern sectors were left unguarded." (p.182)

"The Crusaders, maddened by so great a victory after such suffering, rushed through the streets and into the houses and mosques killing all they met, men, women and children alike. All that afternoon and all through the night the massacre continued. Tancred's banner was no protection to the refugees in the Mosque of al-Aqsa. Early next morning a band of Crusaders forced an entry into the mosque and slew everyone. When Raymond of Aquilers later that morning went to visit the Temple area he had to pick his way through corpses and blood that reached up to his knees." (p.188)

"The Jews of Jerusalem fled in a body to their chief synagogue. But they were held to have aided the Moslems; and no mercy was shown to them. The building was set on fire and they were all burnt within. (p.188)

I used these quotes from Runciman not only to show the brutality of the event, but also because the Jerusalem sites mentioned in his account are in the very same location today, the city gates go by the same names, and the Temple area and the Mosque of al Aqsa are as they were in the eleventh century. These places are witnesses to painful memories that are also held in people's hearts and minds. In the Emmaus this sad history would correspond to the disciples loss of hope and their contentious attitude as they walked along. Jesus is represented as the one who walks with suffering humanity to remind them that there is a way out, which comes from a redeeming God. Luke does not tell us what scriptures Jesus used for his instruction; he quoted from "Moses and the Prophets". Possibly one of the passages Jesus cited was from Isaiah:

*"On this mountain the Lord of hosts
will provide for all peoples... He
will destroy the veil that veils all
peoples, the web that is woven over*

*all nations; he will destroy death
forever.” (25:6)*

I want to make a brief reference under the heading of Jesus' teaching from the scriptures to the continuation of the Bible courses which have been an important part of this sabbatical experience. We recently concluded two courses, which were the longest in length, on the Gospel of John and on the Pentateuch or Torah. Later I will make a more complete report on these courses but here, in the context of the Emmaus story and Jesus bring the disciples into the mystery of the resurrection through an appeal to the scriptures, these courses should be noted. The event of the Exodus, central to the Torah as well as to the Gospel of John and the Emmaus story in Luke, is another link between all disciples and the biblical instruction on the Easter mystery.

F. They urged him: stay with us; the location of Emmaus

Four towns claim the honor of being the “original” Emmaus, and we visited two of them. The clue as to location is found in the gospel story where the village is said to be “seven miles” from Jerusalem. (In Greek measurement: 60 *stadia*) A *stadium* is equal to 600 feet, just as a football field is equal to 300 feet. The other hint as to location in the story is that the disciples were able to reach the village and have supper with Jesus, with time remaining to return to Jerusalem and find the other disciples still awake. Some manuscripts suggest that the “60” *stadia* in the story should be “160”, but that would make the return trip to Jerusalem, after supper, hard to accomplish. At present there is one claimant at 30 *Stadia* (Motsa); two at 60 *stadia* (Abu Ghosh and Qubeiba); and one at 160 *stadia* (Imwas). Our guide's choice for the one most likely to be what Luke had in mind was Motsa, because 1. Motsa and Emmaus are variations on the same name (don't ask); 2. The distance from Jerusalem fits the time frame of the story; and 3. A Roman road connecting the village with Jerusalem has recently been discovered by archeologists, making the route a likely one for the disciples. Our group walked into a valley and inspected the remains of the Roman road. We sat around on a couple of boulders and read the Emmaus story from Luke's Gospel. Once again, some stones, barely holding their place in the road bed after two thousand years, became silent witnesses to the message of the Risen Christ.

The other Emmaus site we visited was Abu Ghosh, which is identified with the village of Kiriath-jearim, a place frequently mentioned in the Old Testament but which became prominent when it served as the resting place of the Arc of the Covenant for the twenty years between its restoration by the Philistines (1 Sam. 6:21) and its removal to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6). There is a Benedictine monastery here with a peaceful garden; the theme is hospitality, as in the Emmaus story: stay with us. One of the great Holy Land themes is the love of the land, and an ancient expression of this theme is in the cultivation of the fields and the creation of gardens. The Benedictines have always excelled at the development of their property, which they combine with a dedication to hospitality. In the Emmaus story, the disciples, moved by the stranger's capacity to speak to their hearts, offer him hospitality. They were, of course, richly rewarded. Remember the teaching of the Letter to the Hebrews: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” (13:1)

E'.D'.C'. Jesus breaks bread, their eyes are opened, Jesus departs

The Emmaus story has often been seen as an ideal outline for the Christian liturgy. First, there are disciples of Jesus in the course of their lives, walking together, not in harmony this day. They represent the community that gathers with all its imperfections in the name of Jesus. We are a *pilgrim* church. Jesus joins this community and instructs them by recourse to the sacred Scriptures, which would be the Torah and the Prophets. This is comparable to our Liturgy of the Word, which opens our hearts so that we may continue in the liturgy with faith. Then Jesus “breaks bread” which is the signature action of the Eucharist, in which we “take, bless, break and give bread” as a sacrament of the Presence of Jesus and of the grace of the unity and peace of the Church. The disciples are changed by this experience, and they return to Jerusalem to proclaim a new hope for the Church and for the world. There is no containment of this grace. This experience of the disciples in the Emmaus story corresponds to the dismissal of the Christian assembly by which all are commissioned to “go in peace” and to be agents of peace in their ordinary lives which is where we began this story and this Eucharist. Here is a poem/prayer by Janet Morley that touches on the mystery of Emmaus:

*O God whose greeting we miss
and whose departure we delay,
make our hearts burn with insight
on our ordinary roads
that as we grasp you in the broken bread,
we may also let you go,
and return to speak of your word of life,
through Jesus Christ. Amen*

B'. A' The disciples are in dialogue, they return to Jerusalem

Here are a few hopeful experiences I can point to as evidence of hope in this troubled land.

1. An essay in the press by the Jewish father of a newborn who is described by the father as “the beginning of an endless life”. He says: “Israel is a child-bearing superpower. We Israelis have babies and cherish our children more than any other western society... I thought of the commandment my son is imposing on me with his birth. The commandment to believe in the world his mother and I brought him into. To see that despite everything and because of everything, his place of birth is wonderful. A difficult place, in which hope is still not lost.” Ari Shavit in the Haaretz Opinion and Comment, April 14, 2009. The father in this case was Jewish, but the same sentiment could be that of a Muslim. I saw this celebration of children by both groups in Tel Aviv on Independence Day, April 29, when crowds of families came out on a beautiful day to walk the promenade and to picnic on the lawns. It seemed to be all about families and children, enjoying the land (and the sea) on the 100th birthday of the City of Tel Aviv.

2. An Easter Concert at the Basilica of St. Anne, which is our neighbor on the Via Dolorosa. *Hymnes en Temps Pascal*. The Jerusalem Oratorio Chamber Choir is made up of Christian, Jewish and Muslim members, a group of about thirty persons counting the pianist and percussionist. The representation of the three religions was very powerful; their unity in music showing the human possibilities for finding our common desire for beauty and harmony. The selections were largely taken from the religious experience of indigenous peoples, for example, the Misa Luba (Messe traditionnelle congolaise). What made me very proud and at home were the American Spirituals, "I been in the storm", and "Daniel, Daniel, the Servant of the Lord." When you think that these ardent expressions of hope were carved out of the cruel experiences of slavery and colonialism, in which the human spirit cried out with the confidence that God hears the prayer of the poor, the promise of new life is made again.

3. A evening with Fr. Joseph Nguyen Cong Doan, SJ, who had conducted the course in John's Gospel. He is the superior of the Jesuit community at the Biblical Institute (Biblicum), and the Director of the Institute. He has quite a history apart from his academic achievements. He is from Vietnam, and, as the United States began withdrawing from Vietnam, he was sent from Rome, where he had been the assistant for Asia to the Jesuit Superior General, back to Vietnam to be the Regional Superior of the Jesuit communities in the country. Shortly afterwards, in 1981, he was arrested by the Communist state and spent the next nine years in jail. During the course on St. John he had recounted many anecdotes from his imprisonment, and so we invited him to return one evening when he could devote some time to telling us about his experience in more detail. It is hard to summarize his story, because it is so intimately connected to his personality and presence. His style is both profound and humorous; he seems to have an inner peace and glee that is not daunted by the most perilous of situations. He told us that when he was arrested he said to himself: "now my mission is beginning." For nine years he had no reading materials and had to draw the Gospel of John from memory. He shared his food with all and participated in a sharing that allowed for everyone to have what they needed. He told us about his industry and his managerial skill, so that he became the prisoner who scheduled the daily work of all the prisoners. One thing he said that struck me (as an American) was the following: Vietnam is a small country with giant neighbors. "Maybe that is what makes us very conscious of our identity, and very protective of it. So we have to say to the French, to the Americans, to the Chinese, to the Communists: you cannot overcome the spirit and the soul of the Vietnamese people; any power you have over us is only partial and temporary." (My paraphrase)

Here are two of the stories which he told with a gleeful attitude. The Jesuits had begun to ordain priests in secret; these undercover priests continued to hold their regular secular jobs. One, an architect, became good friends with another professional and they worked on many projects together. Each finally discovered that his good friend was a secret Jesuit! Further to the architect, the Communists evicted the Jesuits from their residence because they thought the house was wired to the outside world and that they could never clean the site. With the eviction of the Jesuits from their house, the state built them a new residence. Who did they select as the architect? The secret Jesuit. The second story: the Communists closed down the

seminaries and put all the professors out of work. So with so much free time on their hands, the seminary teachers set about to translate the Bible into Vietnamese, and accomplished this monumental task which they could never have done if they were preoccupied with teaching their seminary courses. Then, to top off the irony, the professors presented the new Bible to the only publisher in the country, that is, the Communist state, which then proudly printed the Bible in the Vietnamese language!

Father Doan opened his remarks with a song which he had recorded on his laptop. It was the Andrew Lloyd Weber ballad "Love Changes Everything", which I usually associate with Sarah Brightman but which was sung here by a different artist. It was the perfect theme for his talk. In the John's Gospel course he had emphasized the theme of the stream of love coming from the Father through the Son and carrying us along. (Jn 14:23). Here, the application was clear. You can take an experience as hopeless and wasteful as a decade in jail, and, through the power of love, change it for yourself and for your fellow prisoners and even for your captors. I recommend the song to you again and I give here two of the verses for your Easter meditation.

*Love, love changes everything
Hands and faces, earth and sky
Love, love changes everything
How you live and how you die
Love can make the summer fly
Or a night seem like a lifetime
Yes, love, love changes everything
Now I tremble at your name
Nothing in the world will ever be the same*

*Off into the world we go
Planning futures, shaping years
Love (comes in) and suddenly our wisdom disappears
Love makes fools of everyone
All the rules we make are broken
Yes, love changes everyone
Live or perish in its flame
Love will never let you be the same
Love will never let you be the same*