

**Sojourn in the Land of the Bible**  
**A Journal of My Sabbatical**

**January 27-May 14**  
**Fr. John Rowan**

It is Saturday, February 28, 2009, the end of the fifth week of the sabbatical program. We are one third of the way through the fifteen-week program. Cold and rainy weather has come into Jerusalem. To be more dramatic about it I will say that it is 2 degrees, chill factor -2. Centigrade, of course, but that puts it just at or below freezing. And when it rains it creates a penetrating cold. So I am staying indoors, reading, and writing this journal.

I am trying to internalize the flood of experiences I have had, and information I have received, in the past five weeks. I suppose, in a way, the mind and spirit resist forces which may challenge their position of repose, their level of comfort. Because you do not know the place to which you are being called. That isn't just a sabbatical problem; it's probably what we should call an "Abrahamic" problem. "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you." (Gen 12:1)

I came across a comforting thought in a book review in the English Edition of the daily paper of Israel, Palestine and Jordan, Haaretz. The book was one of the poems of Miller Williams called Time and the Tilting Earth: "We can best be exact about the cosmic things –God and truth, beauty, eternity and love- by not talking directly about them." I'm sure this is the fundamental lesson we learned in Thomistic philosophy, that we speak of God and things divine only by analogy, with proportionate language which humbles our words, which are, after all, derived from our limited experience, but still have some value in expressing the inexpressible. I call the thought a comforting one because it justifies my silence about the spiritual meaning of my experience in Jerusalem. That excuse may not last forever.

Fr. Joseph Doan, our teacher of St. John's Gospel, told us a good story about language and about being careful about what meaning we may impose on the text. (The technical word for interpretation is *exigesis*; for imposing a meaning on the text, *eisegesis*.) Several years after he was released from prison, he was on a commission to translate the Liturgy of the Hours into the Vietnamese language. The commission had to submit its translation to the Communist censors, who generally approved, but who took singular exception to their translation of Psalm 14. "You are mocking us with this prayer." "This is a reference to us!" The line of the psalm they objected to: "The idiot says in his heart, 'There is no God'. The translators said: "How could it mean you? That text has been around for over 2000 years, and Communism began in 1917?"

Another story from Fr. Joseph: How do you know that Adam and Eve in the Genesis account of the fall of man in Chapter 3, were not Vietnamese, or Korean or Chinese? The answer: if they were Vietnamese, the snake wouldn't have a chance to speak before the humans grabbed it, cooked it and ate it. They weren't Korean because a Korean man would never accept food from his wife's hand; he would expect her to put it on a tray and present it to him bowing low. The

Chinese would engage the snake in conversation: “You really think the fruit is attractive and has special powers?” Then the Chinese would snatch the fruit from the tree, sell it, and proceed to eat the snake. (The three Korean members of our program assured us that the modern Korean woman is the equal of her husband.)

On Monday we continued our study of the Book of the Prophet Amos. This is the first written book of the Old Testament, with a strong social justice message. Our teacher, Fr. Guy Theunis, assigned us an exercise which was to exemplify a use of sacred Scripture which will be encouraged by the recent Synod of Bishops when their deliberations on the Word of God are published. We were divided into four teams, each assigned a text from Amos, e.g. 5:12, addressed to magistrates: “Yes, I know how many are your crimes, how grievous your sins: Oppressing the just, accepting bribes, repelling the needy at the gate! Therefore the prudent man is silent at this time, for it is an evil time.” Each of the groups was assigned a text along with the charge of turning it into contemporary prophetic language, employing the literary forms of Amos, e.g. oracle, or irony, and addressing it to 1. presidents and legislators; 2. magistrates and judges; 3. bankers and traders; and 4. priests and religious leaders. Then we came together in a large circle and conducted the four brief liturgies, each having a liturgical action to symbolize the message. I think the group having the bankers and traders had the easiest mark for the prophetic arrow, in view of the world financial crisis, and they did a good job of it.

We started a new course this week, “Judaism, Ancient and Modern”, given by Deborah Weissman, PhD, an American who has lived in Israel for thirty years and is an Israeli citizen. She wrote her doctoral thesis at Hebrew University on the History of the Education of Jewish Women. She is the president of the International Council of Christians and Jews. For one thing, I did not have to adjust to her accent, because it is the same as mine. (Or, as we would like to say: she had no accent.) She prepared me for a story I read in Haaretz on how businessman Joseph Kafner, the chairman of the board of the United Jewish Communities-Federations of North America, returned to the active practice of his faith. He sent his daughter to kindergarten in a Jewish day school, despite fearing it would be too “parochial”. One day he asked his daughter what she learned in school that day. She told him about the story where God tells the Israelites not to rejoice over the deaths of the Egyptian oppressors who had drowned in the Red Sea because they, too, were God’s creations. Hearing this lesson from his daughter caused him to reflect on the origin of his humanitarian ideas. This led him to rediscover his Judaic roots.

Dr. Weissman was explaining how the rabbinic process of Midrash would try to tease meaning out of contested texts or puzzling texts in the Bible. She gave as an example Ex 15: 11, “Who is like you O Lord, among the gods (or among the holy ones, or among the mighty)?” A midrash suggestion: by adding another letter, the text would read: “Who is like unto you O Lord, among the silent?” Why is God silent during this triumphant song of Exodus? Because the Egyptians are suffering. That is why, at the Seder, we pour a little wine out of our cup before blessing and drinking it. Our cups cannot be full while the Egyptians are subject to the plagues, because, although they are our oppressors, they are creatures of God.

Reference is made to Thomas Cahill, The Gifts of the Jews. A really good little book, but it ends with the Babylonian exile, 586 BC. But Jewish culture did not end with the destruction of the first Temple (586BC) or the second (70 AD). Today, the total number of Jews in the world is about 13.5 million, of which 5.5 million are in Israel and the same number in the U.S. Their birth rate is climbing in Israel but is flat in all the other places they are found.

This week we began another new course which is called The Spirituality of Islam, given by White Father Frans Bouwen, a Belgian. This course is bringing me into entirely new territory. If I can claim some knowledge of Judaism through the Bible and through having Jewish neighbors my whole life, I have no foundation for understanding Islam. Consider the contrasting way Islam receives its sacred text, the Qu-ran, from the way Jews and Christians receive the Bible: in its writing the human author (as Matthew or Mark) plays no part, makes no contribution. Inspiration is supernatural dictation. The book cannot be interpreted in relation to the created world, as we do with Bible texts which we compare with contemporary texts unearthed by archeology. The text of the Qu-ran can be interpreted only by other texts from the same book; you cannot, for example, go to earlier Arabic poetry to find images that may shed light on similar images in the Qu-ran. There is an interpretative device called "Implicit Prophecy", which Islamic scholars may consult to find the meaning of a text. But there is a serious disagreement on its usefulness. Sunni Muslims, who represent about 80% of all Islam, accept the principle of implied prophecy. Shia Muslims, the other 20%, do not. I will hopefully have more to say about this later.

Islam, having one Book, which is received as the standard or ideal of the Arabic language, would consider our having four gospels to indicate the inherent weakness of our texts. Why would you need four if any one of them was complete. Contrast this with the following quote which I have taken from Raymond E. Brown, The Community of the Beloved Disciple, p.163:

"This means that the Great Church, "the church catholic" of Ignatian language (St. Ignatius Antioch, 115 AD), whether consciously or unconsciously, has chosen to live with tension. It has chosen not a Jesus who is either God or man but both; it has chosen not a Jesus who is either virginally conceived as God's Son or pre-existent as God's Son but both; not either a Spirit who is given to an authoritative teaching magisterium or the Paraclete-teacher who is given to each Christian but both; not a Peter or a Beloved Disciple but both. Tension is not easily accepted in ordinary life, and we usually try to resolve it. So too in church history-but because of the decision about the canon, attempts at simple resolutions of these theological tensions into a static position on one side or the other are unfaithful to the whole NT."

We had classes in the Gospel of John, and the Epistle to the Romans, both of which I have introduced in earlier letters. I will defer further comment until I have a better handle on the whole thesis of these two teachers. Here I will make a self-disclosure which I learned about myself over the course of time. When I was in school I did very well on final exams, but not on daily quizzes. In Myers-Briggs terms, I am intuitive not sensate in my perception of reality. Daily quizzes tend toward asking the student for details before he knows how they fit into the big picture. By final exam time, the big picture has been presented and so the intuitive student can now see how the details fit in. Some people begin with the details and come to understand the big picture; some intuit the big picture (the gestalt), however vaguely, and then go back and see the relevance of the nuts and bolts. I didn't always keep this in mind in dealing with people. I remember presenting the idea to a parish committee that it would be good for the parish to get a computer. It was in 1985. I basically failed to be convincing because I hadn't done my homework and detailed for the committee, and for myself, exactly what tasks I would assign to the computer, and what software was available for the accomplishment of these tasks, etc. I mention this because the study of scripture texts can be very precise and tedious, and it may take a long time before the ah-hah! moment of insight, is given. This may apply to the Letter to the Romans in a special way.

I want to tell you about our trip to Bethlehem. This is a suburb of Jerusalem which is within several miles of our convent. It is a Palestinian community in the West Bank and so it is walled off with the kind of barrier we use along the expressway for sound control. There is an armed entry way, with a gun turret, room for two way traffic through a traffic control gate which is opened and closed for each vehicle that goes through. Also there is a processing center for pedestrians, which is what the bus or auto passengers become if the authorities elect to check them out individually. The entrance gate reminded me of the reception gate at Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Too melodramatic? Maybe, but it was a weird experience seeing it from a distance and then going through.) We were asked not to take photos because our driver was Palestinian and we didn't want to make things awkward for him. On entering, the guard allowed the whole bus load to go through without his having entered the bus, although we all had our passports ready for an on-board inspection. On leaving they made us "dismount" the bus and go through the pedestrian process in which they inspected our passports; and we exited to get on the bus on the other side of the wall. As we exited, long lines of Palestinian workers, coming home from their jobs in Jerusalem, were waiting to get through the checkpoint into Bethlehem. I understand it could take them hours.

Bethlehem is the city of David's origin. (See Samuel 1&2) The infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew both place the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The first Church of the Nativity was dedicated in 339AD, and is said to be above the cave in which Jesus was born and laid in the manger. Later, Bethlehem became the home of St. Jerome, the patron of biblical scholars, who translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin so that it would be available to the people (The Vulgate). In the Church of the Nativity, our group celebrated mass in a cave that is the St. Jerome Chapel. It is the custom in this church for all groups visiting there to celebrate the mass using the texts of Midnight Mass, with the Lukan Gospel of the shepherds and the angels. Also we sang carols, "O Come All Ye Faithful", and "Angels We Have Heard on High". In

our little chapel we could hear other carols being sung by other pilgrim groups. I should point out that it was Ash Wednesday! After the Gospel and homily, we had a service of ashes, then resumed our Christmas celebration. Afterwards, we went down to the large cave which commemorates the birth of Jesus. One part of the cave is marked by a large silver star: this is the place of the birth. The other part of the cave has a small indentation or shelf, which would be the place of the feeding trough for the animals, the manger, where the newborn was placed.

A short distance from the Church of the Nativity is the Field of the Shepherds, where the Franciscans maintain a chapel and a garden to commemorate the shepherds who were summoned to the manger by the angels. The most interesting part of this for me was a large cave which has been made into a chapel, but which until 1940 was the home of a Palestinian family, who sold it to the Franciscans. The thirty people in our group fit comfortably in the cave, which had electricity and running water (and perhaps a toilet, which I did not see; there was another room that I did not explore). This room, or home, changes your sense of living in a cave like a "cave man", and suggests that being relegated to the cave was not exactly a rejection. We are accustomed to the passage in St. Luke's Gospel: "She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn". There is another way to translate the word "inn", and that is "upper room". That is, there was no room for them in the upper room (the room built over the cave), because it was crowded with Joseph's family who had also come for the census, and so Mary and Joseph went to the cave beneath, where there was privacy and warmth.

To the tune of "O Come All Ye Faithful", we sang this hymn which is taken in part from the Nicene Creed:

*Deum de Deo,  
Lumen de lumine,  
Gestant puellae viscera,  
Deum verum, genitum non factum.  
Venite, adoremus Dominum.*

God from God,  
Light from light,  
Born from the womb of a young girl,  
True God, begotten not made.  
Come, let us adore the Lord.

This verse celebrates the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. The gospels of Matthew and Luke give us a soft introduction to the mystery, with Mary and Joseph, Magi and Shepherds and Angels. John's Gospel rushes to the unfathomable truth: "And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." (Jn 1:14) I am working on the spiritual journey which will bring me through God's grace from Bethlehem to a deeper place in the mystery of the Word made flesh. Pilgrims come to places like Bethlehem, not because it is a necessary link to the mystery of the Incarnation, but because they hope that the place, and the prayers of the other pilgrims, will

deepen their faith in the mystery of Jesus, whose necessary link to us is through the Bible and the Tradition of the Church.

Before leaving the holy sites in Bethlehem, I want to mention St. Jerome. His tomb is here but it is empty; his remains were taken to Rome, possibly to keep it from desecration during the ascendancy of Islam in their holy land. While almost all the churches in the Holy Land were destroyed by the Muslims, the Church of the Nativity survived, because the Muslims saw on the wall of the church a mosaic depicting the Magi, with eastern garb, and so parts of the 5<sup>th</sup> C structure remain to this day. St. Jerome translated the Bible here. He is also known as being irascible. So modern hagiography has made him not only the patron of biblical scholars, but also the patron of anger management.

While in Jerusalem we visited two powerful witnesses to the Incarnation of the Word. The first was the Franciscan Family Center, which helps Christian Palestinian families cope with the stresses of poverty and segregation. The other witness was Bethlehem University, which provides higher education for Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, under the leadership of the Christian Brothers (de la Salle).

At the Franciscan Family Center we were greeted by Sr. Maria Grech, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, who is from Malta and is a social worker. (In this land the word “missionary” is whispered, if used at all.) She explained to us that family life behind the wall is under great stress. Unemployment means that the husband is at home all day; that maybe families have had to double up so that the wife has her mother-in-law to cope with, and the mother-in-law has different, possibly more indulgent rules for raising the children, so the wife and mother is frustrated in her loss of control of her own household. The Center began a Woman’s Session where women who were at their wit’s end, and were ready to walk away from their families, can discover that they are not alone, and can develop strategies for coping. For example, the Center started a program in which unemployed men were given jobs improving the housing of stressed families, putting up walls or building a second floor, or improving the plumbing and sanitation, so that some of the stress of being confined to the same small space might be relieved. As many as ninety house projects a year have been undertaken. Thus the dignity of work and the dignity of housing are restored to a family. Is this not a clear witness to the mystery of The Word made flesh and dwelling among us? The Franciscan Family Center participates in the funding that is created by the collection we take up in the churches on Good Friday. I always thought of this collection as supporting “holy places”, and in part it does. But it also supports holy people, that is, the Christian people of Palestine, in some very basic ways. For more information on The Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land, visit [www.ffhl.org](http://www.ffhl.org).

Our second witness in Bethlehem was Bethlehem University. Exactly one year ago I received an e-mail from Brother Daniel Casey FSC, who was the Vice-Chancellor (CEO) of Bethlehem University. He said that he was visiting the brothers in Oakdale and they mentioned that you were going on sabbatical and had chosen a program in Jerusalem...He continued: “I would be happy to welcome you to visit Bethlehem University as your schedule permits.” As it turned out, Brother Daniel was ill with cancer at the time, and he never got back to Bethlehem. He

died at the Brothers' headquarters in Narragansett, Rhode Island during the summer, and I never made contact with him.

I first met the De La Salle Brothers in the fall of 1949 when I reported to Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School in Brooklyn as a freshman student, commuting on the railroad each day from Baldwin, L.I. It was the first time in my life that I had male teachers. And I didn't really understand why they would not become priests. But I came to know their particular calling, their love of scholarship, and their dedication to their work. The brothers were very selfless, and never revealed anything about their family name, or their place of origin, or their parents or relatives. They were like Melchizedek, "Without father, mother or ancestry..." (Hebrews 7:3) Now the brothers have resumed their family names, and while at Bethlehem University, I met Brother Joseph Lowenstein, Director of Special Projects and former CEO of the University. He comes from Elmhurst, Queens County, and entered Bishop Loughlin High School just ten years before me, in 1939. I showed him my e-mail from Brother Daniel, and together we came up with a number of other brothers we both knew.

This university has about 3000 students, Christians and Muslims, and it charges them only \$480.00 a year, while their per pupil cost is about \$3000.00, amazingly low when you compare it with what even elementary education costs in the United States. They are fully accredited and their students have no difficulty getting into graduate schools. A panel of three students, men, was provided to our group so we could ask questions about their education and also about their education. Two were Christian (Catholics) and one a Muslim. They were very mild mannered but quite spontaneously spoke about their hope for the Palestinian homeland as well as their continuing friendship with each other despite religious differences. It was all very hopeful. I'm not sure if Bethlehem University receives funds from the Good Friday collection. If you want more information about the university, you can visit their web site at [www.bethlehem.edu](http://www.bethlehem.edu).

This week I took a local bus to *Yad Vashem*, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Museums. Our program is going there for a longer visit, so I will wait till then before reporting on it. The horror of it took place 1900 years after the birth of the Prince of Peace. In Bethlehem, the pilgrim peers into the cave to try to catch the spirit of God's love expressed in the mystery that the baby there is identified with the very person of God. In *Yad Vashem*, we encounter a memorial that shatters the soul, to think that we could ever be capable of visiting such destruction on other human beings. And it wasn't just the master criminals who were tried at Nuremburg who caused this calamity. Over 30,000 people were prosecuted for Nazi war crimes. I guess, at an earlier time in their lives, they may have considered themselves very ordinary folks.

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