

## Sojourn in the Land of the Bible

### A Journal of my Sabbatical

January 27-May 14, 2009

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#### Letter Nine

It has been two weeks since I wrote last. In this letter I have much to say, and am concerned that I will not be able to make a coherent package of all the disparate parts. I will begin by naming the things I want to cover: first, the ambience of Jerusalem, on these beautiful spring days, with many visitors to the city for the celebration of Passover and Holy Week. Next, the services that we are having at this convent for Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. Next, a visit to the Holocaust Memorial Museum, which is called Yad Yashem. Next, visits to other holy places, including the town of Bethany, where Jesus' friends Martha and Mary and Lazarus resided. Finally, lest our remembrances remove us from this world and our present condition, our prayers and hopes for the world and for all suffering humanity, in particular our Palestinian neighbors here in the Holy Land.

I am going to use as my template the diary of Egeria, a pilgrim who visited the Holy Land in 381-4 and, during her stay here, compiled an extensive and detailed diary of the liturgical practices of the Jerusalem Church. (You can get an English translation of her diary on the internet at [Egeria Translation.mht](#).) Her visit to Jerusalem was just sixty-eight years after the Emperor Constantine had given a favored place in the empire to the Christians, by the Edict of Milan (313 AD.) Egeria is reporting on practices of the church which predated Constantine by many years, although the new state toleration of the church, which returned to the Christians any of their meeting places and other properties which had been confiscated, allowed secret celebrations of the faith to become public. Her journal, when published in Rome, had a profound effect on the way the Roman Church celebrated Holy Week, and this ancient design, with its focus on the initiation of catechumens, underlies the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. I learned about Egeria from the history classes in the seminary given by Fr. Francis Glimm. He introduced us also to Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea, (260-339AD) who wrote [The History of the Church from Jesus to Constantine](#).

#### Station at Bethany: the Saturday before Palm Sunday

Egeria mentions the liturgy at Bethany on the Saturday before Palm Sunday which is still observed by the Greek Orthodox. The bishop summoned all the people to gather at the place where Mary, and earlier Martha, had met Jesus when he came to Bethany on the news that Lazarus was ill. (Jn 11:32) She reports that crowds of people from the city were spread over all the nearby fields. The town of Bethany is at the summit of the Mount of Olives which is east of Jerusalem. You can walk up the mountain but it is easier to take a taxi and walk down. I went there with two of the priests on our program. The main features are the Tomb of Lazarus, which we entered and climbed down into the ante-chamber and into the tomb itself. There is

also a church there dedicated to Martha, Mary and Lazarus. (If you're shopping you can drop into the "Tomb of Lazarus Spices and Souvenir Shop"!)

The theme of Bethany is discipleship and hospitality, as well as friendship and the glory of Jesus, whose command is: "Untie him and let him go". It isn't right to assign discipleship to Mary and hospitality to Martha because together they stand as icons of what a disciple ought to be. This mutuality is captured in the Jan Vermeer painting "Jesus at the House of Martha and Mary", an excellent copy of which Joe Ali made for the vestibule of the new Bethany Chapel at St. Lawrence. The hospitality and refuge and friendship of this family for Jesus provides a touching background to the events of Holy Week. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, the temple guard was *behind* him; he was not trapped. If he had continued walking away from the approaching soldiers, he would be travelling up the mountain nearer and nearer to the house of his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. There he would have found welcome and protection. But, this time, he did not "slip away", as he had done in the past. (Lk 4:30) This is another testimony to his freedom: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again". (Jn 10:18)

There is a plaque on the façade of the church with the legend:

*Today as in the past, the Love of Jesus  
seeks a refuge, where he is lovingly  
expected and where he can rest.  
He finds our hearts are filled with distractions  
-people, work, our own interests-  
He longs for us to empty our hearts and  
lovingly receive him.*

Bethany is a Palestinian town surrounded by a huge wall, and entry to the town is through a checkpoint with barbed wire and fully-armed (but sleepy) soldiers who are required to inspect your passport. The three of us who visited had passports from Canada, Phillipines and United States. The sentry on duty made a brief inspection and then waved us in. My friend from Canada, given to minor mischief, asked the sentry if he was a Palestinian. This drew a derisive smile and the kind of expression that said: "Do I, in this Israeli uniform, look like a Palestinian??" Fortunately, we were not Palestinians so this insulting remark was overlooked.

The checkpoint at Bethany points to the complex scene here, which was described by a Palestinian journalist in the International Herald Tribune on the opinion page recently in the following way: "Israel is simultaneously running three systems of government. The first is full democracy for its Jewish citizens-ethnocracy. The second is racial discrimination toward the Palestinian minority-creeping Jim Crowism. And the third is occupation of the Palestinian territories with one set of laws for Palestinians and another for Jewish settlers-apartheid." (Ahmad Tibi, April 7, 2009)

In an accompanying article, a Jewish journalist concluded his column with the following: "In recent weeks, the Palestinian Authority has warned Arabs that it is "high treason" punishable by death to sell homes or property to Jews in Jerusalem; shut down a Palestinian youth orchestra and arrested its founder because the ensemble played for a group of elderly Holocaust survivors; and celebrated the deadliest terrorist attack in Israel history with a TV special extolling the massacre. On Thursday, after a Palestinian terrorist used an axe to murder a 13-year old Jewish boy, the Al Asqa Martyrs Brigades-a wing of the "moderate" Fatah party-issued a statement claiming responsibility." (Jeff Jacoby, April 7,2009)

During Lent I read a heartbreaking account of the life and ministry of Elias Chacour, now the Melkite bishop of Jerusalem and Palestine. (Blood Brothers) The story begins with the account of his family in Galilee, where his father was a farmer, and of the simple life shared by Palestinians and Jews prior to the United Nations Declaration of 1948 and the subsequent military evacuation and destruction of his hometown and the arrest of his father and brothers. He studied in France for the priesthood, and returned to the region to be the Abuna (little father) for a parish of dispirited Palestinian Christians who had been expelled from their villages and were seemingly without a future. The story shows a pattern which we see even to this day: that military and security forces in Israel operate outside the framework of the courts and the laws of the land. Twice, Chacour's father and other villagers petitioned the Israel Supreme Court for a judgment that the confiscation of their property was illegal, and twice they were successful in their court battle. When they presented the court decree to the Israeli occupying forces, the soldiers made as if to return the land, but instead bulldozed all the houses and the church so that the place was uninhabitable. Chacour has many lessons in the book, but two of them stay with me: one, when you visit the Holy Land, don't focus on the historic stones only. Allow your eyes and your heart to consider the "living stones", the Palestinian and Jewish people who once lived in peace here. His second lesson: if you study the Palestinian question in order to take sides, you are part of the problem. The resolution of the issue must be rooted in the most profound teaching of the prophet Isaiah and of Jesus. "Lord Jesus, you came to gather the nations into the peace of God's kingdom. Lord, have mercy."

### Passion Sunday (Palm) Procession from Mount of Olives

Egeria notes that after services in the churches on Palm Sunday morning, the bishop invited that people to assemble at the top of the mountain and to process down into the city to gather for prayers at the church called Anastasis (which is the official name "Resurrection" for the church we call "Holy Sepulchre") This is the pattern described in the Gospel of St. Mark: "When they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, he sent two of his disciples [to find the colt which he would use for the entrance procession to the city]. Mk 11:1 This was also our pattern for the day.

At ten o'clock on Sunday morning our group celebrated Eucharist at the Church of All Nations, a Franciscan church in the Garden of Gethsemane, which has the legend written in Latin over its front doors: "He offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears...and he was heard because of his reverence."(Hebrews 5:7) This was a perfect setting and a peaceful beginning to

our observance of Holy Week. In the reading of the Passion, I was assigned the role of Pilate, whose last words in the trial are: "Why? What evil has he done?" The verdict, in which Jesus is handed over to the crowd for crucifixion, is in the voice of the narrator, so Pilate is spared having to say it in Mark's Gospel.

In the afternoon, I went by myself up the Mount of Olives, not as far as Bethany, but about a mile away, because this was the route of the great Palm Sunday procession following the path that the gospels say was that of Jesus. I waited and finally I could see the first signs that the procession was approaching. The people came down the road about ten abreast, then turned into a downward staircase that could accommodate about five abreast, so there was a massive bottleneck, but no panic or bad manners, just hymn singing and waiving palms or olive branches. The procession, which we estimated to be about 5000 people, swamped my spot, and the brutal sun had shifted to flood my shady retreat, so I decided it would be best to just go with the flow. It wasn't so much a decision to move as a decision not to resist being carried along. As I joined the procession, a German group was coming along, and I thought, what luck; if anybody can make progress in this jam, it has to be a German group. I was right. The procession came down the mountain and into the city, but instead of going to the Anastasis, as Egeria had done, the crowd went to the courtyard of the Church of St. Anne, which is served by the White Fathers (Missionaries of Africa), where a sermon was given by the Latin Patriarch (Latin Bishop of Israel, Palestine and Jordan), and a party followed. Instead of going to St. Anne's, I went home to our convent, which is a few doors down on Via Dolorosa.

I think the triumphal procession of Palm Sunday 2009 must really be contrasted to the humble entry of Jesus described in the Gospel of Mark. (Mk 11) Jesus' entry is intentionally marked by signs of humility, not the least of which is riding on a donkey. This is to illustrate the truth that he "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave and found human in appearance" (Phil 2:7) During Lent I read a new commentary on Mark's Gospel, The Last Week, by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in which the authors suggest that the humble entry of Jesus on Palm Sunday should be contrasted to the imperial entry of Pilate, the Procurator, the provincial governor, whose headquarters were in Caesarea, but who would be coming to Jerusalem for Passover in order to keep a lid on any possible Jewish political activity. His entry procession would be a display of power and weapons, coming through the most prominent gate in the city. His Jerusalem residence is the majestic palace called today The Citadel, a site of marvelous archeological excavations. This was the praetorium in which Pilate judged Jesus. (Jn 18:28-19:16) In contrast, Jesus' entry is cheered on by the poor souls who trust in God. Their "Hosannah" is not a triumphal boast but a cry for help. It is taken from Psalm 118:

Open to me the gates of justice;  
I will enter them and give thanks to the Lord.  
This gate is the Lord's;  
the just shall enter it.  
I will give thanks to you, for you  
have answered me  
and have been my savior.

The stone which the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone.  
By the Lord has this been done;  
it is wonderful in our eyes.  
This is the day the Lord has made;  
let us be glad and rejoice in it.  
O Lord, grant salvation!  
O Lord, grant prosperity.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord;  
we bless you from the house of the Lord.  
The Lord is God, and he has given us light.  
Join us in procession with leafy boughs  
up to the horns of the altar.

Just a note on the “horns of the altar”. You will note that in the design of ancient altars, each corner has a handle in the shape of a horn. (Ex 29:12) If someone accused of a crime is being pursued and can make it into the sanctuary and grab hold of the horn, he will have found asylum. This is the origin of finding “sanctuary” in a church. This is the mentality of the followers of Jesus: they are welcoming him to the city and encouraging him to grab the horns of the altar to achieve justice for them. They are accustomed to having their rulers “break the horns” off the altar so there is nothing to cling to, as we hear in the Book of the Prophet Amos, in which the Lord warns the unjust that when He strikes there will be no sanctuary for them:

On the day when I punish Israel for his crimes,  
I will visit also the altars of Bethel:  
the horns of the altar shall be broken off  
and fall to the ground.  
Then I will strike the winter house  
and the summer house;  
The ivory apartments shall be ruined,  
and their many rooms shall be no more,  
says the Lord (Amos 3:14)

In contemporary language these followers of Jesus would be like a person arrested and detained indefinitely, without the opportunity of a hearing, and without being able to invoke a constitutional right of *habeas corpus*.

I want to mention the Jewish tradition of the Blessing of the Sun, which took place at the Western Wall on Wednesday. This is a prayer that is said only once every twenty-eight years. The meaning of this tradition comes from the order of creation in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 1.

Day 1 (Sunday)	Let there be light
Day 2 (Monday)	Dome to separate the water above/below
Day 3 (Tuesday)	Dry land/ vegetation

Day 4 (Wednesday)	Sun and Moon
Day 5 (Thursday)	Fish and Birds
Day 6 (Friday)	Cattle, Creeping Things, and Humans
Day 7 (Saturday)	Rest

More than 5000 Jews flocked to the Western Wall before dawn on Wednesday to recite a prayer said once every twenty-eight years to bless the sun. The blessing "*Birkat Hacama*" marks the sun's return to its starting point at the moment the universe was created, after completing a 28-year cycle known as the "*machzor gadol*" or "large cycle". This year the prayer came on the eve of the weeklong *Pesach* (Passover) holiday, commemorating the exodus from slavery in Egypt. The timing was coincidental, but added to the joyous feeling. I read in the Jewish press that in New York City, a group was to pray on a penthouse near Ground Zero. In 1981, the last time the blessing was said, a ceremony was held on the 107<sup>th</sup> story observation deck of the World Trade Center's South Tower. Last Wednesday's blessing near the site of the demolished towers was said in memory of those who died in the September 11, 2001 attacks. This blessing and the perception of the sun and moon that it represents, are not science, or creationism, but a playful and prayerful reflection on the theology of Creation, that the universe in all its glory is a gift of God, for the good and enjoyment of the creature that was made in God's image.

### Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter

For our understanding, Egeria's description of the liturgies of the sacred Triduum have to be referenced to the way we tell time (first hour of night = 6pm), and also to the names that were later given to the places where the prayers were said. Perhaps at some later time I will do this, or instead, find the source that already contains such a transition. But what we do see in her diary is an attempt to celebrate the liturgy at "stations", ie, places that approximate the last steps of Jesus, and "hours" that would follow the sequence of where Jesus was on the three holy days. And this remains the pattern of the restored Holy Week services that we have in all our parishes today. Here at this convent, our schedule as follows:

Holy Thursday:	8:30am	Mass of the Oils at the Anastasis
	5:00pm	Mass of the Lord's Supper in the Basilica here
	8:00pm	Prayer in the Peace Garden on the Mt. of Olives
	9:00pm	Walk to Church of "Peter at Cockcrow" for prayers
Good Friday	5:45am	Way of the Cross on Via Dolorosa
	10:00am	Public Processions on Via Dolorosa
	3:pm	Celebration of the Lord's Passion
Holy Saturday	9pm	The Solemn Vigil of Easter

The sisters' communities here make creative use of the spaces in this old building. The services of Holy Thursday and Easter Vigil are held in the basilica, which is a restored, high domed space with a lot of old stones and an arch which dates from Roman times. At a level below there is a crypt called the *Lithostrosos*, "Pavement", with ancient street paving stones, where the trial of Jesus before Pilate is commemorated, and where Pilate said the words: "Behold the man", which, in Latin, *Ecce Homo*, in the name of the convent. (The actual Roman trial of Jesus took place at the praetorium which is at the Citadel, which I mentioned above. But it is commemorated here as part of the Way of the Cross-*Via Dolorosa*.) It was in this crypt that we celebrated the Liturgy of the Lord's Passion. Many guests came, as to the other services in the Basilica, because this is one of the few places with an English liturgy. The place added greatly to the mood of the celebration, as if the ancient stones were providing a witness to what we were recalling. And those same stones will carry on their silent testimony long after we are gone.

Perhaps at some later time I will transcribe my notes on the homilies and lessons of these liturgies. Here I just want to make mention of the way the Passion was read on Good Friday. The rubrics call for a brief homily on this day, but it becomes very difficult to keep it short and on the point. Here I saw a nice approach: at the beginning of the reading, the presider gave a brief introduction, and during the reading, at two other points, he inserted a brief instruction. When the reading was concluded, there was no homily, because it had already been given. Here's a little lesson from this three-part homily: the most important word of Jesus from the cross was: "I thirst". (Jn 19:28) The interpretation of the words comes from Psalm 42: "My soul is thirsting for the living God. When shall I see God face to face?) For Jesus, the way of the Cross was not a path to Golgotha, but to the Father.

I want to mention the Holocaust Museum in the context of Good Friday and Jesus' identification with all humanity that is betrayed, mocked, imprisoned, and executed. We visited the museum on April 1, but I had been there before; and I will go back again. The place is many times larger than the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., with many of the same kinds of exhibits. I understand that this is the third incarnation of the site, and that this rendition attempts, and succeeds, I believe, to be much more personal in its telling of the sad facts. I saw this mode of presentation also in the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, where tapes of survivors told of the hiding, the arrest, the separation of families, the transportation, the hunger and cold, the gradual realization of what was happening. A woman says: "It breaks your heart, but then your heart becomes like a pig's heart." Another writes in a letter thrown from a train: "We are all seized with a desire to write letters before we die."

The museum here is called *Yad Yashem*, meaning, *Yad*, a monument; and *Shem*, a name. The reference is to the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

For thus says the Lord:  
To the eunuchs (*those without descendants*)  
who observe my Sabbaths  
and choose what pleases me  
and hold fast to my covenant,

I will give, in my house  
and within my walls,  
a monument and a name.  
Better than sons and daughters;  
an eternal, imperishable name  
will I give to you. (Is 56:3-5)

One exhibit that struck me in the museum was an organizational chart that Adolf Eichmann had sketched during the trial at Nuremberg, showing how the high command flowed for the task of the extermination of the Jews in Germany and in all the occupied territories. There must be a hundred names on the chart, connected by lines drawn in different colors to show various levels of connection and reporting. The mechanical perfection for carrying out the ideology is indeed impressive. The same strange pride in the management of atrocities is shown in other parts of the exhibit. For example, the pitiful movies of thousands of Jewish women lining up to get on board box cars for transport to the camps, were retrieved from the archives of the Nazi's themselves. These movies were made to boast to the high command that the orders to ship the Jews out and to humiliate them, were being carried out. Now all of this technique is shown to be so shameful.

At the museum there is a separate building which is a Childrens' Memorial. Its design is inspired by the saying: "The soul of a human being is the candle of God". To experience this memorial, the visitor walks through a dark passage into a space which is like a twilight zone, with thousands of lights flickering in space all around. As the file of visitors passes through, names of children, on a seemingly endless list, are read, along with their age and the place of their arrest. Outside, there is a statue called "Korzak and the Ghetto Children". It depicts the Polish educator Boris Korzak surrounded by several children. He developed an educational theory and practice based on experience, something like Maria Montessori. When the Nazi's came to ship the children to the camps, he was offered safe passage because of his international reputation. He refused, saying: "I will stay with the children."

The exhibit about Pope Pius XII is ambiguous. It acknowledges in small print that the action (or inaction) of the Pope during the war is a matter of controversy. But in larger print above, there is a pointed judgment entitled "Just to stand there". A few weeks ago, partially in preparation of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI on May 8-15, which includes a trip to Vad Yashem, a high level meeting took place in Jerusalem for the purpose of asking the Israeli cultural ministers and the museum officials to edit the exhibit on Pius XII until the matter of his conduct has been resolved. The central question remains as to whether the Pope did all that he could and whether he did it soon enough.

Of course, the inaction of many leaders in the free world is under scrutiny. The exhibit has excellent footage of the Polish intellectual Jan Karski, who came from a secret mission inside the Warsaw ghetto in 1942 with a personal message from the doomed Jews to both English Prime Minister Anthony Eden and President Franklin Roosevelt, both of whom avoided the issue of the extermination of the Jews and brushed him off. And then there is this strange

praise for the Catholic Church, coming from Albert Einstein, who fled from the Nazis to America:

“Being a lover of freedom, when the Nazi revolution came in Germany, I looked to universities to defend freedom, knowing that they always boasted of their devotion to truth; but no, the universities immediately were silenced. Then I looked to the great editors of the newspapers, whose flaming editorials in days gone by had proclaimed their love of freedom; but they, like the universities, were silenced in a few short weeks. Only the Catholic Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler’s campaign for suppressing the truth. I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am forced thus to confess that what I once despised, now I praise unreservedly.” (*Time* magazine, December 1940)

Another word on the subject came in Rome at the recent bishop’s Synod on the Word of God, when the Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Shear-Yashuv Cohen, departed from his text on the Jewish interpretation of scripture, and, before the Pope and the Synod bishops, said:

“We cannot forget the sad, the painful fact of how many, including great religious leaders did not raise a voice in the effort to save our brethren, but chose to keep silent and help secretly. We cannot forgive and forget it. And we hope that you understand our pain, our sorrow over the immediate past in Europe.”

The last room in the exhibit is an auditorium where the exhausted visitor can sit on a bench as a series of quotations are projected on the walls. Some are expressing the astonishment that such a searing blast of evil should come out of the twentieth century which was thought to be the blossoming of the human race with its technology and social refinement. Other statements are those of hope and encouragement. Here are two:

“It is incredible that the world does not turn back to water, but, instead, goes on as if nothing happened.” This is a reference to the “chaos” condition of the world before God created order, and of “the flood”, which in the Noah story was to have been God’s solution to the evil of the human race.

“Now is the eighth day of the week, the day of our imagination, of how we dream to live.”

So this is an eventful time in Jerusalem. Jews are flooding into the city on buses from all over Israel to celebrate some of the days of the Passover holidays. On Easter Sunday the city was filled with Roman Catholics from all over the world, and Greek Orthodox who are processing with palms -they are a week behind our liturgical calendar. The Monday after Easter, the fifth day of Passover, seems especially festive. Orthodox families are partying all over. Games are set up for children in the parks, and singing groups are performing Jewish folk music. I saw a play tent shaped like a pyramid, with the picture on it of a bad Egyptian wearing a cobra helmet, swinging a whip at the Israelite slaves. The message is freedom and new life. Young Jewish Orthodox families take the new life message very literally: their families are huge, and everybody, including infants and toddlers, gets taken to Jerusalem. I enjoyed just walking around and looking at all the people in their strange clothing that represents different cultures in pursuit of God and the promises of the good life. While the Holy Week liturgies here were beautiful and authentic, I greatly missed St. Lawrence, where I observed these holy days for the past twenty-four years. In the parish, I remember these to be mellow days, sharing in the promise of spring, but more important, participating in the future in which God will gather us all together in his friendship.

Happy Easter to all!

JR