

Shalom

from the Land we call Holy



(TOP AND MIDDLE) VIEWS OF THE WADI QELT, THE MAIN ROUTE FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO; (BOTTOM) THE MONASTERY OF ST. GEORGE OF KOZIBA, FOUNDED IN 420 AD.

In early January, Fr. Dennis embarked on a three-month sabbatical journey to the Holy Land to begin a course of study at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies in Jerusalem. The Institute is situated on the main road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Fr. Dennis offers us a glimpse into his spiritual journey as he experiences the Sacred Scriptures in the land where they began thousands of years ago.

Greetings from Israel, where the word here is sun, not snow, just sun! It has been delightfully warm. This should be the rainy season, but we have not had that much of it. I do enjoy sun, even though I should be praying for rain!

BACK TO THE MONASTIC LIFE ...

This particular week, our group has spent a great deal of time with monks from the Greek Orthodox Church. We left Tantur and took a van driven by the house driver down the long, winding road from Jerusalem to Jericho, referred to by Jesus as He started His famous parable of the Good Samaritan... "And who is my neighbor?" (Lk10:29-37). Our first stop was at the Monastery of St. George of Koziba.

The monastery is literally built into the side of a mountain in the middle of the wilderness about 17 miles outside of Jerusalem. It is amazing how quickly you leave the hectic life of the city and are in the desert.

St. George was founded in 420 AD by five hermits. It was built next to the cave where the prophet Elijah was said to have stopped en route from Sinai and was fed by ravens. Numerous cave-dwelling hermits lived here in imitation of the great prophet. Religious tradition also claims that in one of these mountainside caves, St. Joachim learned from an angel that St. Anne, his until now barren wife, would become the mother of the Virgin Mary. I prayed in a special way here for the parishioners of our cluster parishes of St. Anne and St. Mary of the Hills.

Throughout the centuries the monastery was abandoned and restored numerous times. The present monastery was rebuilt around 1900 by the Greek Orthodox Church. Our guide, a young, bearded Canadian monk dressed in black from head to toe, uncombed hair, and a long, bushy beard (a real monk!) was not a very welcoming soul, he did however warm up a bit when he gave our group a

tour of bones of the martyred monks from centuries past.

Upon leaving St. George, the sun and warmth of the day inspired myself and two others in our group to make our way to Jericho (about 6 miles) on foot traveling the more scenic route along the Wadi Qelt. The valley runs through a steep canyon surrounded by limestone and chalk cliffs. The views were breathtaking. I could just see the story of the good Samaritan coming alive as we walked on.

ON THE ROAD TO JERICHO ...

Claimed to be the world's oldest city, with rich biblical associations, Jericho lies just a few miles north of the Dead Sea. According to the Bible, Jericho was the first city captured by the Israelites under the leadership of Joshua (Jos 6). In the New Testament we are told that Jesus visited this town on several occasions. He healed two blind men in the town and lodged at the home of the tax collector Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). A sycamore tree in the center of the city recalls the extraordinary effort made by Zacchaeus, "a wealthy man who was short in stature" to see Jesus.

When we arrived in Jericho, we took a chair lift up to the Monastery of the Temptation in the Desert, which commemorates Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil after His baptism (Mt 4:1-11). We climbed up to monastery's door and rang and rang to no avail — no one was home. We did, however, meet two nice guys that had biked down from Bethlehem. Despite our language barrier, we were able to communicate using the universal language of food in the form of lunch.

Later in that same week, we again ventured into the wilderness to yet another Greek Orthodox monastery — it would appear that the Greeks have the corner

market on monastic life here. The monastery of Mar Saba is located 11 miles outside of Bethlehem in the wilds of the Judean Desert. It is an amazing structure supported by massive terraces up the cliff-like edge of the ravine. Founded in 483 AD, it once served as the center for nearly 300 monks who lived separately during the week but gathered together on weekends for communal prayer and Mass. Most monasteries were eventually abandoned following the Muslim conquest, but Mar Saba is the only monastery in Palestine to have had a virtually uninterrupted occupation by its Orthodox monks since it was built in the fifth century.

PRAYER, FASTING, & PENANCE ...

The monks at Mar Saba live a severe life — up at midnight with prayer until 4:00 a.m. followed by Liturgy. They eat one meatless meal a day. It is a life of prayer, fasting, and penance. The monk we meet, Brother Lazarus, was from Connecticut and has been at Mar Saba for 10 years. He was very warm and friendly. I think it was a treat for him to have visitors from the United States. He was very willing to share many things about their way of life with us. As we admired the many beautiful icons of Mary, he spoke to us of the community's deep devotion to the Mother of Jesus. I thought of our parish Church dedicated to Mary and remembered all of you in prayer as I stood there in this amazingly holy place. The silence was unbelievable — I could have stayed all day.

IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD ...

Psalm 122 says: "Let us go to the house of the Lord! ... 'our feet are standing within your gates, Jerusalem...'" The week of January 23–30 found our group in Jerusalem at a different house of the Lord each evening at 5:00 p.m. to celebrate the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. Perhaps the most special evening of prayer was held in the Cenacle which commemorates the place of the Last Supper and Pentecost. The prayer of Jesus "that all may be one" was felt deeply by all of us gathered together for prayer in that Upper Room. The Cenacle is used for public prayer on only three occasions during the year, this night for Christian Unity, on Holy Thursday, and again on

the Feast of Pentecost. The crowd each evening was very impressive — people of all ages and from all walks of life gathering together for the sole purpose of praying for unity and peace among the followers of Jesus.

Earlier in my stay here in Israel, I went by myself to Jerusalem one afternoon and found my way to the Upper Room. I had the whole

place to myself for over an hour. I sat there on the stone floor and read from my New Testament (John 13:1-15, Mk 14:1-26, I Cor 1:23-26, Acts 2), the very passages that recount the great events this particular holy place commemorates — the Washing of the Feet, the Institutions of the Eucharist and the Priesthood, the Feast of Pentecost. I was deeply moved by this quiet time in this special city. I prayed for our diocese, especially as we celebrate this *Year of the Eucharist* with Catholics throughout the world; I prayed for the success of our Diocesan Eucharistic Congress next October; I prayed in a very special way for all of you at Saint Mary's with whom I have the special privilege of celebrating the Eucharist each day and where I have the great joy of serving as your parish priest. My final prayer was for vocations to the priesthood especially from our parish.

A PRAYER FOR PEACE ...

Tantur is a huge place that sits on 36 acres of land high on a hill surrounded by a beautiful wall, which encloses olive groves, lemon trees, and lovely dogwood trees already beginning to bloom. There are rose gardens everywhere. I enjoy doing some manual labor in gardens each week to keep me grounded and my hands in the soil!

In many ways the setting reminds me of my old stomping grounds at Holy Name High School in Worcester. Across the street from the Institute are some beautiful fields, where I like to go and walk every afternoon. It is not unusual to



THE CENACLE. THE TRADITIONAL SITE THAT COMMEMORATES JESUS' LAST SUPPER WITH HIS DISCIPLES.

see shepherds tending their sheep, and yes, in the distance is another Greek monastery.

Yet despite the tranquil setting, you don't have to look very far before another picture starts to emerge. Directly outside of the doors to our house is the checkpoint between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. There is a great deal of tension between the Israelis and Palestinians. It gets particularly heated out there on Sunday, the first day of the Jewish workweek. Because we are situated right on a checkpoint, many Palestinians cut through the Institute's property to make their way into Jerusalem and avoid the checkpoint. Many times Israeli soldiers are waiting to catch them. The Israelis are building a wall along the West Bank, reminiscent of one torn down in the city of Berlin 15 years ago. It is a sad situation for many, a place in need of reconciliation, healing, and tolerance from both sides. Our prayer is still the same as the ancient psalmist "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem pray: 'Peace be to your homes. May peace reign in your walls.'"

So that is what I have been up to lately. I miss my parish family and my work at St. Mary's, but I am so grateful to God for granting me this wonderful opportunity to prepare me for the next phase of my priesthood. I will continue to keep you in my prayers throughout my stay in this holy land.

Shalom, Fr. Dennis