

# Holy Land trip gives wide sense of the sacred

Some notes on our Jewish-Christian trip to Israel, July 30-August 9, 1998:

**July 30 — Newark International Airport:** This journey to Israel started years ago in the conversations of women and men in our community who wanted to heal the wounds that existed in Jewish-Christian relations and to build something better for the future.

The more recent events of this exciting venture lie in the agreement we, as a diocese, signed with the Jewish community May 8, 1996. That agreement drew together and formatted the work of earlier years, and we hope that it provided a solid base for future deepening in our relationship.

By this agreement we committed ourselves to study one another's traditions — to respect them and to represent them accurately whenever they are part of our teaching. Moreover, we agreed to speak in defense of one another whenever one is subject to bigotry, prejudice or discrimination.

Our group did not assemble for the first time today. We met four times in the last few months to prepare for the trip. We learned some things about the geography, history, politics and culture of the nation. And the sessions provided a very pleasant opportunity to become better acquainted with those with whom we'll share the experience.

All of us are mindful today that we will miss the presence of Rochester Mayor Bill Johnson, who prepared with us but who because of the death of his father was not able to join us.

Kathleen Schwar and Greg Francis will be reporting the journey for the *Catholic Courier*. Doug Mandalero will be submitting stories to the *Democrat and Chronicle*. My own effort in what follows will be to share with you the reflections, associations, memories and impressions evoked by the experience of the days ahead.

**El Al Flight 18:** The flight seemed long, but it did provide an opportunity to remember earlier trips to the Holy Land. This will be my fourth visit. The first was in June of 1963. I made the trip when I had completed my theological studies in Rome and before I returned home to begin priestly ministry in the Diocese of Albany.

The second was in 1979. I had planned for several months to travel to the Holy Land with some friends at the end of my seven-year term of service as spiritual director of the North American College. As it turned out, between the planning and the traveling, I was ordained a bishop. So I had the privilege of that pilgrimage prior to coming to our diocese to begin my ministry as bishop.

The third trip was in 1983. I went to a six-week study program in Rome with a group of bishops in the summer of that year. At the end of the Roman sojourn, we enjoyed a trip to Israel. A highlight of that third journey was the presence and teaching of Father Raymond Brown, SS, the distinguished scholar.

It has been 15 years since my last visit. I remember, of all the trips, that the experience helped me to put things in perspective, to reflect on what was happening in my life and to refocus my commitment and energy for my return home. I look forward to our arrival and the chance to think about life as it has unfolded for the last 15 years.

**July 31 — Jerusalem:** It is 11 p.m. I just came to my room after a dinner that concluded the activities of a very long but wonderful day.

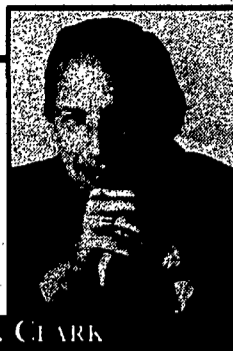
After our night flight to Tel Aviv, we came to Jerusalem and began almost immediately to enjoy the treasures of this place. This evening at dinner, we shared impressions of our walk through the streets of the old city and along the Way of the Cross; our visit to the place of the Crucifixion; to the tomb venerated as Christ's place of burial; and to the Western Wall of Jerusalem for Jewish Shabbat prayer.

It was quite moving to hear the people in this group tell what went on in their hearts during the activities of the day. Some spoke of tender family associations and memories. Several mentioned how impressed they were when they observed friends of a different faith tradition so rapt and reverent as they visited sites so important to them.

I had the sense in listening that something important had already begun in all of us. Thematic in our conversations was the emotional impact even a few hours here had on us and the need so many felt for time to absorb the experience.

After our visit to these holy places today, I think about all the people I know or have known who make real for me the mysteries we celebrate here. I mean men and women, boys and girls who have received the message of Christ and live it. They are ones who cherish life and share it with generosity. They know the importance of the now and have a sense that every moment is graced. They are humble enough to know their own limitations and ready to forgive the failings of others. There is a sense of realism and depth about their faith

## along the way



By BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

that allows them to find hope even in painful situations, and to encourage others in similar circumstances.

**August 1:** So much. So little time. A museum visit, three lectures, a dinner out and an unsuccessful trip made up this day, which has now crossed into the first hour of August 2.

I think it would be fair to say that the morning hours at the Tower of David Museum put us in touch with the history of Jerusalem — its origins, its shifting size and shape over time, its successive rulers and dominating powers. It is a striking museum in its layout and organization. Those who planned it teach well. We enjoyed the assistance of Menachim, our well-informed guide, but I think here we might have absorbed much from the resources available to all visitors.



In the afternoon, we had three lectures: "The Land and the People — The History and Vision of Zionism," by Rabbi Levi Lauer; "Christians in Israel," by Hanna Siniora and Rizek Abusharr; and "The Christian-Jewish Encounter in Israel," by Gemma Del Duca, Sister of Charity.

If the morning spoke to us about Jerusalem's complex history, the afternoon gave us some taste of its present-day political, religious and cultural complexity. The state exists in a hostile atmosphere. There are inter- and intra-faith tensions. Economic, social and cultural challenges also abound.

On this second day, after recovery from the overnight air journey, it was a delight to share the company of this group. Felicia "Bo" Clark was my seat mate on the bus. Bo, who is from Christ Church, had a Jewish father. So this trip is important to her for deeply personal reasons. Today, her commitment that none forget the Holocaust shone brightly in her words and the passion with which she spoke them.

By happy chance I have been table companion to Michael and Suzanne Schnittman. Mike's Jewish; Suzanne's a Roman Catholic and our diocesan consistent life ethic coordinator. Can you imagine how exciting it is for all of us that they and their personal experience enrich these days. Mike, I am happy to tell you, has been a wonderful docent to me about the food of Israel. He has not yet steered me wrong.

We had some fun today when we learned that the *Democrat and Chronicle* carried a front-page, above-the-fold story about our trip on Saturday. And of course, we directed some ribbing toward Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, and Father Joe Brennan when told that a photo of them accompanied that article.

We just returned home from a dinner in a neigh-

boring Arab village. All enjoyed the same food — a wide range of vegetable dishes, followed by grilled chicken and lamb. Our plan was to stop at the Wailing Wall on the way home to be in prayer with the Jewish community on this day when they mourn the destruction of their temple. We changed that plan when traffic so delayed us that we judged that to continue would bring us home much too late, given the full day we anticipate tomorrow.

**August 2:** Jane Napier, Father Dan Tormey, Michael Schnittman and I will be leaving soon for the home of Einat Ramon and Arik Asherwan. In similar-sized groups, the rest of our party will visit other Israelis' homes.

I look forward to the moment — especially after the day we have had. Not a bad day. A very good one, in fact. But one that had a deep emotional impact on many if not all of us.

The first event was a celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy at the Holy Sepulchre. The church was bustling this morning. In its several chapels, Christians from all over the world were celebrating in several rites. A song here, a homily there. Over here, Spanish-speaking pilgrims asking if they could join us. Just there, a family from Russia by way of Jaffa wondering the same.

In the midst of it all we pray, mindful of what divides us but aware in new ways as well of our existing unity and possibilities for more. Rev. Dick Gilbert reads from Ecclesiastes. Sister Joan Sobala leads us in sung response. Deacon Brian McNulty proclaims the Gospel.

I offer a brief homily and invite others who wish to share their awarenesses, their memories and hopes in this place that speaks of new life. It is a beautiful moment. Nothing fancy or elaborate, but peaceful and hopeful and good. "Lord, it is good for us to be here..." I know better now what they meant.

At lunch, Susan Nowak began our orientation to Yad Vashem, which is a center for documentation of the Shoah or Holocaust and the 6,000,000 Jews who were murdered in it.

Now it is hard to write about because it is not easy to move through raw emotions to the formulation of logical thought. It's easier to name emotions that spring from the experience — sorrow and anger at what happened, and fear lest it ever occur again. Or to raise the questions that inevitably rise in the face of Shoah: How could it possibly happen in the human family? Where was the church when it did? Would we behave differently if, God forbid, it should ever happen again?

I shall remember the visit for a long time. Most of all, I'll remember the very first phase of it — the memorial to the 1,500,000 children who were slaughtered. We heard their names and ages and their home places read aloud. And we wept at the tragedy of it all.

We just returned from our visit to the home of Einat and Arik. She is a rabbi in the conservative tradition of Judaism; he is a rabbi in the reform movement. Einat is a sabra, or native-born Israeli; Arik is from Erie, Pennsylvania. We had a delightful evening with them, and learned a good deal about their respective religious commitments and their common commitment to the people of Israel.

As I review the events of the day I realize that I omitted mention of a midday visit with Ehud Olmert, mayor of Jerusalem. Although his time with us was limited, he did give us a picture of the great diversity of this city, of the richness and the problems that flow from such diversity.

**August 3:** The sound of a jack hammer broke into the quiet of our prayer in Bethlehem this morning. No one seemed to mind very much. It may have been that we took it to be God's reminder to us that the birth of Jesus was not in the peaceful, burnished setting we can so easily make it out to be.

It may have been the Gospel today, which spoke of Jesus' wanting, after a day of healing and teaching, to go apart to mourn the death of John the Baptist, only to be reminded that the people were hungry and had no food. At Bethlehem, the House of Bread, God reminded us to be good bread for one another.

Two other stops composed our day — a visit with the Mayor of Bethlehem, Hanna Nasser, and a visit to Ofra, an Israeli village located in the territory known as the Palestinian Authority.

Mr. Nasser, like his counterpart in Jerusalem, is a person of passion and commitment. His particular concerns are water-supply problems, a city budget much too small to meet municipal needs and the task of preparing Bethlehem to receive the great influx of pilgrims expected there during the year 2,000.

At Ofra, the uncertainty of the future is the main preoccupation. Depending how much Israeli territory is negotiated over to the Palestine Authority, it is possible that Ofra will no longer be a part of Israel.

We'll soon go off to a dinner meeting to reflect on the experiences of the day. More to come next week. Peace to all.