



Rev. Paul Womack, left, places a stone on the grave of Oscar Schindler — whose story was told in "Schindler's List" — in Jerusalem Aug. 8. With him are, from left, Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, Felicia Clark, Joan Pearson, Jane Napier and Journalist Doug Mandelaro.

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they can, but they are so concerned with peace issues and nonviolence issues and loving the oppressed, that they can't understand that for the Jewish people of 2,000 years of oppression and then a Holocaust, we have to celebrate these things."

Father Joseph Brennan said he realized the cross has brought fear "rather than a sense of love, of compassion" into the hearts of Jews. His first realization of this came when he was studying Hebrew in Israel in 1956. He was the only priest, the only gentile in the class.

"Everybody was very polite but standoffish and I didn't understand it at first," he recalled. "As we got to know each other, they said in the countries where they used to live, the priest was looked upon as being hostile to Jews; 'When we saw a priest coming we went to the other side of the street.'"

"I was completely dumbfounded by this. I remember saying to myself, if I had any chance in the future to change that, to help in any way to change that so Jewish people had a different view of Christianity, Catholicism and priests, I would do what I could."

That was even before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), whose perspective on Judaism, notably *Nostra Aetate*, marked a radical change of course. The council affirmed God's covenant with the Jews and ended the church's longstanding teaching of contempt — which had included, for example, prayers for the "perfidious Jews"

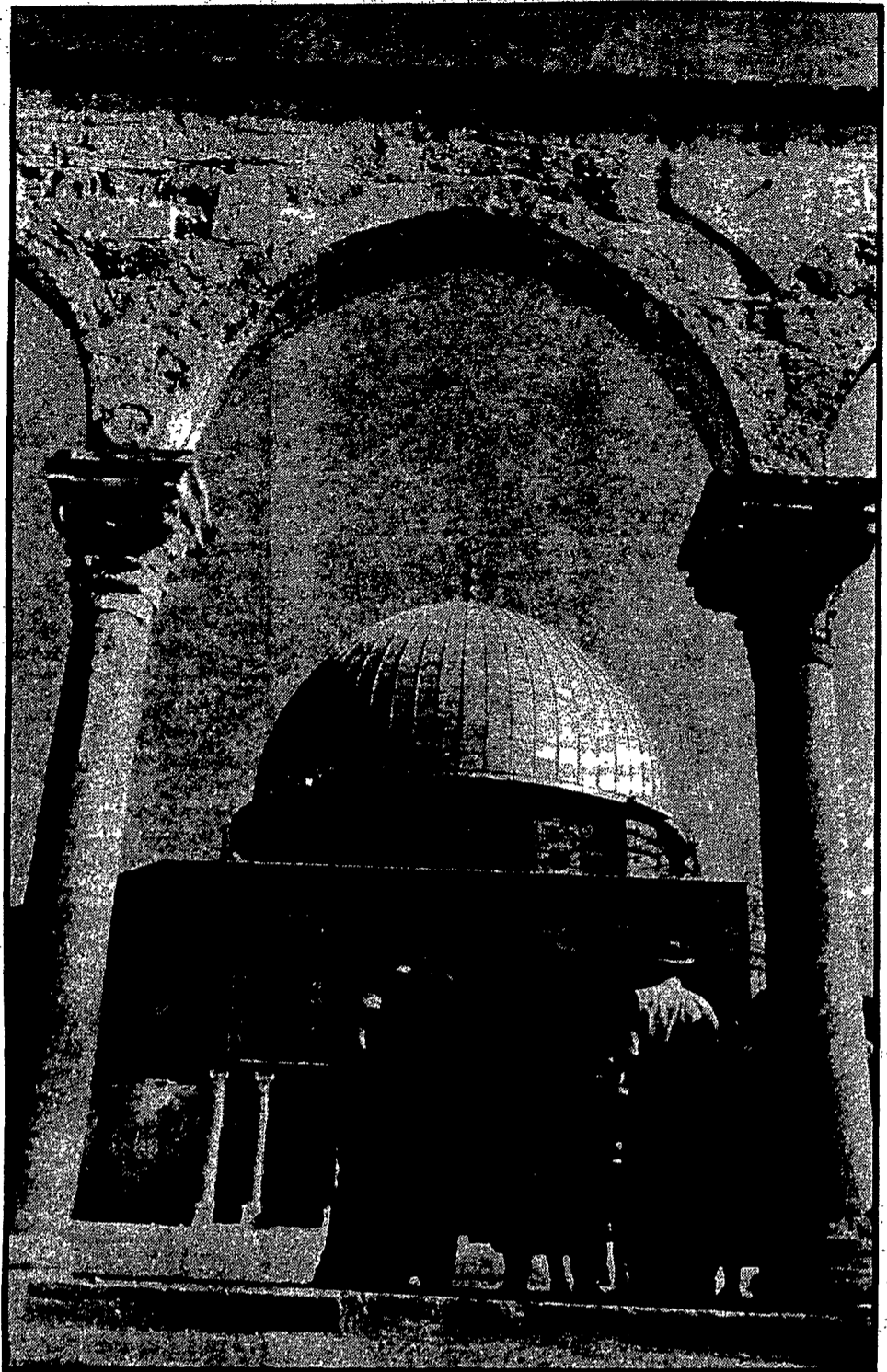
at Eastertime.

Father Brennan returned to Rochester to teach at St. Bernard's Seminary, taking students to Temple B'rith Kodesh for talks, later to other synagogues as well; he also taught the Sisters of St. Joseph. He plunged into formal dialogues, and remains involved today, in the Commission on Christian Jewish Relations of the Jewish Community Federation of Greater Rochester and the Greater Rochester Community of Churches.

Now, he said, "We are treating each other in ways I thought were unthinkable when I was ordained."

#### Landmark statements

Father Brennan, Deacon McNulty, Sister Nowak and Rabbi Katz were among three of the task force



Interfaith Leadership Mission participants stand outside the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim holy site on Temple Mount, Jerusalem, Israel, Aug 7.

## Stones tell the stories in Israel

Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, Guest Contributor

On the bus ride up to Jerusalem from Ben Gurion Airport, our newly met, wiry, knowledgeable Israeli guide, Menachem Hefetz, casually remarked that there was a local ordinance: All buildings were to be made of Jerusalem limestone.

For the first two days, I worried that the country would run out of this beautiful, golden limestone. Jerusalem, with a population of 600,000, already spilled over numerous hills. Everywhere we looked construction was going on: new homes, hotels and high-rises. Renovations as well.

On the third day, our air-conditioned bus ventured out into the West Bank, passing through Palestinian and Israeli checkpoints — first to South Arab-held Bethlehem, and later in the day, north to an Israeli settlement in Ofra. There, in the countryside, was stone. Lots of it. I breathed a sigh of relief.

There was no less stone in Galilee, but the color was more black than golden. Basalt, Galilean basalt, which could be shaped into roundish boulders, was the stone used in the Hall of Remembrance at Yad Vashem. Yad Vashem is the institute where the meaning of the Holocaust is studied and its victims honored. The Hall of Remembrance is the place where soil (samples) from all the Eastern European concentration camps was gathered. It is a place of prayer and commitment to a future without the repetition of genocide.

Looking at all this endless stone, it is no wonder that Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned (Acts 7:55-60) and that the woman taken in adultery was almost stoned (John 8:3-11). No wonder that Jesus, defending his disciples for acclaiming him, told the crowd, "If these keep silence, the very stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40).

Throughout our trip, stones were always underfoot — on city streets as well as in the countryside.

Massive piles of stones mark historic places of con-



Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, visits with a child at Ofra, an Israeli settlement in the disputed West Bank.

quest and bullet holes pockmark stone walls where battles were fought. The stones in these places are not tied up. Let the people forget.

A recent tradition has begun in Israel. Visitors to holy places and memorial places leave their own small stone at the shrine, the marker, as if to say, "Yes, I was here. I saw. I honor this person, this place." On our last morning in Jerusalem, we made our way through the intense heat to Oscar Schindler's modest grave. There were the stones, ringing his name atop his gravestone.

Golgotha, where Jesus died, is a sunny place enclosed in the upper level of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Kneeling under the altar, one can put one's hand down into the cool-feeling hole that held the cross. The place where Jesus lay as he was taken down from the cross is marked by a flat, worn stone. Arab Christian women prayed there, kneeling back on their haunches, arms stretched out over the stone.

And the rock of the tomb that held the dead Jesus was there — the site of singing, prayer in many languages, the air thick with incense the Sunday we were there for worship, celebrating the Lord's Resurrection.

Yodfat, a pristine first-century town in Galilee, is the site of a dig in which the University of Rochester played a major role. For six summers, archaeologists, teachers and students dug, revealing the stones that made up homes, public buildings, the life of a town destroyed by the Romans in 67 A.D.

Riding up the twisting, old, one-lane road from Jericho to Jerusalem, we paused to walk up a stony path to an overlook. There, across the ravine, clinging to the side of a mountain, was the Greek Orthodox monastery of St. George. For the designers of this monastery, the stony mountains were a challenge to their architectural skills.

So, too, for the creators of Masada. High above the Dead Sea, on a mountainous plateau, Herod the Great commissioned a winter palace and fortress. We peered down over the walls to see the stones outlining Roman camps set up there, preparing for the assault on Masada in 73 A.D. (The day we were there, by the way, the temperature was at least 110 F.)

Everywhere we went, the stones told stories. Everywhere, the stories revealed faith in God, courage in the face of danger, human cleverness.

Phrases from the Scriptures kept coming to me as we rode, walked, stood among the stones.

"I will take your hearts of stone and give you hearts of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26).

"Set yourselves close to the Lord, so that you too may be living stones" (1 Peter 2:5).

When I got back to Rochester, I told my friend, Diane, about these stone impressions. Her words are a good way to end these thoughts:

"The stone is essential as our God."  
Sister Sobala normally preaches at St. Mary's Church, Rochester, from 1982 to 1998.