

(Not so) Innocents Abroad

A Sabbatical Journal

by Msgr. Dennis L. Mikulanis

September 3 to November 15, 2013

Week One

In 1869 Mark Twain published *The Innocents Abroad* which humorously documents a trip he and a few of his friends took to Europe and the Holy Land. It was the first time any of them had been out of the country and, thus, the title. Well the *(Not so) Innocents Abroad* will be my attempt to let you know how my sabbatical is going, since so many parishioners asked me to do so. It is not my first time out of the country and I'm not quite as "innocent" as Mr. Twain and his companions (though I can still be surprised)!

I left San Diego at 9:40 a.m. on Tuesday, September 3, and arrived at Tel Aviv around 6:00 p.m. (I think) on Wednesday, September 4. There is a ten hour time difference and that's the reason for such a gap in times. However, a 23 hour trip by any standards is exhausting. I arrived at The Tantur Ecumenical Institute, my home for the next 10 weeks, where they promptly fed me, let me unpack, shower and go to bed. Remarkably, I slept well and it took only a day or so to acclimate to the time change. Tantur is a small town about 15 minutes outside of Jerusalem and in walking distance to Bethlehem, which I see from my bedroom window. We began early the next morning with orientation and introductions. There are 14 of us in the program: Australians, Americans, Romanian, English and Filipina. It is a good group and we share and laugh readily which is important in a group like this. So far we've only had one real set of lectures and that was "Biblical Geography." It sounds boring but was absolutely fascinating and it gives a good, solid foundation to the land, the people and the scriptures we read. Fascinating.

There hasn't been much free time, but the first day we had a group of us took the bus into Jerusalem and, this Innocent got ripped off by an unscrupulous bus driver who deliberately short changed me. Since I wasn't really familiar with all the coins used here I thought I was getting the right change and I wasn't! That won't happen again.

Saturday evening, September 7, I joined Bishop William Shomali at a harvest celebration for the local Indian Community in Jaffa. They combine their rice harvest with the Birthday of

the Blessed Mother. I liken it to our Thanksgiving Day. We took part in an outdoor procession from one church to another, concelebrated Mass and then sat down to a meal of Indian food. There were about 2,000 people present for the event and it was a wonderful display of faith on the part of the Indian Catholics in this very non-Christian part of the world.

There is absolutely no detectable concern, worry or anxiety over what the U.S. will do with Syria and at a special prayer service for peace, called for by the Holy Father, thousands of people came together at the Church of All Nations in the Garden of Gethsemane to ask the Prince of Peace to deflect the dogs of war and bring justice and peace to the people of Syria.

This coming week promises whole new adventures!

Week Two

Today is Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. It comes at the end of the High Holy Days and is known as the Day of Atonement, when Jews around the world fast, pray, read and ask forgiveness of God for their sins.

Today is when the slate is wiped clean and people can begin all over again.

The country is shut down, and I mean *shut down!* Driving, though not illegal, is generally forbidden and those who do drive risk having their cars stoned by the more Orthodox Jews. (I told the Director that sounded like fun and asked if we could stand on the street corner and stone passing cars. He didn't think that was a good idea. Rats!) Even the airport in Tel Aviv is shut down with no planes going out or coming in until after sunset. Coincidentally, today (9/14) we Christians celebrate the Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross, through which absolution, reconciliation and salvation came to the world. A walk into Jerusalem to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was considered, but considering it is hot and humid again, and that it would be a good hour and a half walk each way, we decided to stay put and say our prayers here at Tantur. It's incredible to see the whole place with nothing – *nothing* - happening!

We are located about five minutes walk from the “separation fence” (a huge wall with guard towers, actually) that separates Bethlehem from Israel. It is no problem to go through the pedestrian gate, which I've done, to visit Bethlehem but the gate is closed today. It will be a good day to spend reading and writing.

This past week has been very busy with lectures and a few field trips (which combine lectures). On the days we don't have the field trips we have lectures from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. At the end of the day we could take a taxi into Jerusalem but most of us are too worn out to do so. Next week will have a lighter lecture schedule and we'll have more field trips to archaeological and historical sites in the area. It's all fascinating and I'm loving every minute of it (except for my very small twin bed which is as hard as a brick!). The weather has been hot and humid as well. Thankfully, I have an oscillating fan in my room which is getting a workout.

The lecturers who have spoken have been very even handed in their views of the Israeli-Palestinian situation and everyone here – everyone – agrees that there is no real objectivity. The past week has focused a lot on the Scriptures though, so it will be interesting to see how the more contemporary situation is described. The locals just shake their head at the incompetence of world leaders over the Syrian situation.

As fate would have it I've already met three people here I know. Bishop Shomali, the Auxiliary Bishop of Jerusalem who has hosted me for a couple of events; Mahoul, our guide for the last two parish pilgrimages whom I ran into in Bethlehem; and the cousin of Nader Quimsieh, the gentleman who comes to the parish to sell olive wood products around Christmas time. What a small world!

Week Three

Week two of the sabbatical program has finished and it has been a whirlwind two weeks. The lectures have been very good but they are all over the place with little if any continuity. I think they'd be better if there was a unitive thread in them from the beginning. We've had scripture, history, archaeology, field trips, politics, culture, religious practice all given to us so far, and trying to catch it all and make some sort of sense out of it is a bit difficult. However, we can't fault the quality of the lecturers we've had. Well, maybe one or two haven't been so good since I found myself playing solitaire on my iPad as they approached the end of their presentation, much to the amusement of the person next to me who took a surreptitious picture on his cellphone of me playing solitaire. One of the lecturers walked by and, like a schoolboy afraid of getting caught, I hid what I was doing. Here I am, 62 years old, 36 years a priest, a Doctorate in Theology and I'm afraid of getting caught by the teacher! Ah, the value of a good education!

This week Jews began a weeklong celebration of Sukkot, the Festival of Booths (google it for an explanation). On the first day of the Holiday the country pretty much shut down again but at least the Arab busses and taxis were running. It's not as strict as was Yom Kippur. It did provide us a good day to rest and read and most of us stayed "home."

I had the opportunity this week as well to say the noon Student Mass at Bethlehem University, run by the Christian Brothers. The University was founded by the Vatican as the first major university for Palestinians. 75% of the students there are Muslim and the vast majority of those are women. It's an amazing outreach of the Church for the cause of quality education for the Palestinian people. The University is also supported by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre to which I and some of our parishioners belong. There were only 8 people at the Mass, none of them students, but at least the Mass is offered. The Brothers also invite one of us each week to say their own community Mass on Wednesday or Saturday evening.

The most amazing thing of this whole program so far is to experience the antiquity of the Holy Land. One day we visited the City of David, the original Jerusalem, which is quite small, then walked through Hezekiah's Tunnel, carved out of solid rock 2,700 years ago in the face of a looming Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. Water is still flowing through it. We followed the excavated Western Wall of Temple Mount and marveled at the stones carved and placed by the workers of King Herod the Great. Another day we went to Tel Gezer, an ancient Canaanite City about an hour west of Jerusalem – again, a site almost 3,000 years old that was a center of industry for King Solomon! Just think of the millions of people who have tramped over this land throughout the centuries; and now I'm adding my footprints on the paths.

By the way, if there's any news of trouble in this part of the world, we haven't seen it. However, there's absolutely no objectivity on the part of the people here, resident or visitor, as to who's right and who's wrong politically, but that's for another time.

Week Four

Gosh! I have been at Tantur for almost a month now. The schedule has been packed with classes, lectures, field excursions and other activities so the time has flown by. October will go even faster because we will take a week and go the Galilee Region of Israel and then we have a “free” week October 20 to 26 where we can do whatever we want. I’ve decided to go to Rome. Yeah, yeah, yeah I can hear you now. “WHAT? He’s going to Rome too?” How could I pass up the opportunity since I’m already on this side of the pond and I got a great deal on the airfare and a hotel! Besides, there are friends there I can visit (no, the Pope isn’t one) and I can take that opportunity to make it into a retreat experience. I have always found a great deal of spiritual renewal there, especially when I visit the tomb of St. Peter.

The past week here was pretty amazing. The focus was on the diversity in the Holy Land with speakers talking about the Palestinians, the Israelis, and all of the Christian Churches which are here. Catholics of all Rites, Orthodox of all kinds, Christians of all denominations are represented in the Holy Land and all vie for “a piece of the pie.” The most numerous are Orthodox and Catholics who have been here for centuries. Each group maintains certain parts of all of the major churches and sometimes they actually fight one another if a line is crossed that shouldn’t be. We were told by one of our guides that at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre worship services begin at 6:30 a.m., then another at 7:00 then another at 7:30, then another at 8:00 and, we’re told, by the time everyone is worshipping the place is a racket of singing, chanting and prayers. On one hand it’s kind of distressing that we Christians can’t even get our act together in worship, but on the other hand to have such diversity under one roof is symbolic of the world God created. From the chaos we can discover harmony and beauty if we want to. Somehow, it all works!

Last week I had Mass at Shepherd’s Field in Bethlehem with Bishop Shomali, the Auxiliary Bishop of Jerusalem, who celebrated a Family gathering Mass where he and the rest of his family welcomed me as a new “cousin.” Here, everyone is a cousin! It’s mind boggling how many languages they all speak, jumping from one to the other with ease. The bishop also

showed me a piece of land that the Church is buying to turn into a campground for their Scouts. I'm glad he can see the potential in it but I have difficulty doing so. It's steep, rocky, needs an access road and a *lot* of work. However, when Bp Shomali looks at it I can see it done!

Another thing about here is the lack of recycling. There's trash everywhere and no one recycles aluminum, glass or plastic. Empty beverage bottles are everywhere and it kind of kills us "Westerners" to throw such things in the trash. Then again, look how long it took us to recycle seriously and even to use our reusable shopping bags at the grocery store.

Week Five

The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, (EOHSJ) to which I and some of our parishioners belong, is an official knighthood of the Church which was originally established in 1099 during the Crusades to protect the shrines sacred to our Christian Faith. While it never ceased to exist it did fall out of use until restored by Pope Pius IX in 1847. Today the Knights and Ladies support the Catholic Church in the Holy Land through many different charitable causes (schools, housing developments, clinics, orphanages) as well as help provide the funds necessary for the upkeep of the shrines. The work done by the Order is tremendous! Last week I was invited by Bishop Shomali to attend a ceremony at the Latin Patriarchate for 397 German Knights and Ladies who had come to the Holy Land and were to receive their “Pilgrim’s Shell” – a scallop shell with the Jerusalem Cross in the middle, indicating that they had made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was quite an impressive ceremony and at the dinner which followed, to which I was also invited, I was given the chance to practice my German. Those with whom I sat were all very complimentary of my grasp of German (though I was reminded it had a Viennese accent) but I think they were just being kind. Actually, almost the entire evening was conducted in English, which almost every single one of those Germans knew! There were also Knights from France, Belgium and Russia present for the evening. It was an impressive display of support by the Order for the Church in the Holy Land!

Monday was a “free day” so two of us took the opportunity to visit *Yad Vashem*, the Jewish National Memorial of the Holocaust, which was an exhausting visit not only for the sheer size of the museum and grounds, but because of the magnitude of the horror it documents. The priest I was with was successful in finding the name of one of his colleagues from Germany on the Memorial Wall of the Righteous which honors those who aided and hid Jews during the war. By visiting a place like *Yad Vashem* one cannot help but wonder how human beings can treat each other so badly. Think about it: WW II and the Holocaust were not that long ago and there are still many alive today who remember it. Even so, what have we really learned? Look at the way people caricaturize and demonize those of nationalities and religions different from their

own. This is still seen here in the Holy Land where Israelis and Palestinians just can't seem to work things out. For each side the "other" simply doesn't exist, except in pejorative terms. As an example, last week Palestine changed their clocks from "summer" time to "winter" time. In Bethlehem, a ten minute walk from here, it is now 1 hour behind Israel. One of the Christian Brothers who staffs Bethlehem University (which is a recipient of the work of the EOHSJ) says this is the first time this has ever happened, and it happened because the Palestine Authority simply wanted to show their independence from others, regardless of the effects on its people. It's crazy.

There was also a tempest in teapot this week when the Anglican priest who is here felt jilted because a few of the Catholic priests said Mass one morning unaware that he was going to celebrate an Anglican liturgy later in the day, so he cancelled his liturgy which most of us were going to attend. It caused a HUGE, childish stink on his part, a *perfect* example of the foolishness of a divided Christianity. Is it any wonder that in the gospel we read "The Lord wept." (Lk 19:41)?

Week Six

A ride on an Arab bus here – which we take to get from Tantur to Jerusalem - can be like Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride. The busses are inexpensive and get you where you want to go but they’re generally very small and very crowded. The drivers do their jobs and are experts at multi-tasking. One day last week I took a bus and marveled at how the driver could take the fare, count the change, put the coins in the coin counter, give the ticket, talk on two cell phones at the same time and still manage to get us where we wanted to go!

This past week we were in the Galilee Region of Israel. We left on Monday at 6:45 a.m. and the first stop was the ancient city of Caesarea built by King Herod the Great on the Mediterranean Coast. This was just the first of several ancient archaeological sites we visited and the amazement continues: Who were the workmen who built these places? What were their lives like? Were their concerns similar to ours today? What happened to them? HOW did they build these huge cities and structures with no modern tools and equipment? We spent two nights in Nazareth where we visited the Basilica of the Annunciation. We also learned something new. Tradition tells us St. Joseph was a carpenter. However, there’s no wood in the part of the country but there is a LOT of stone. The ancient city of Sefhoris, a major market and production center in the Galilee, was being built at the time of Jesus. Nazareth would be about an hour commute from Nazareth and, here’s the clincher, the Greek word to describe the work of St. Joseph (and I have to take the experts’ word at it because I flunked my Greek exam twice before passing) means “stone worker.” Consequently, St. Joseph probably was a stone mason rather than a carpenter. Basically that’s unimportant to the message because his occupation is irrelevant. What is important is his “yes” to God to be the husband of Mary and foster-father of Jesus.

Tiberias was our next stop where we visited so many of the sites of Jesus’ ministry: Sermon on the Mount, loaves and fishes, Primacy of Peter (John 21 – which usually makes me

choke up with emotion). We also traveled north right up to the Syrian Border about as far as we could. If there are troubles here I haven't seen them. We were hosted for lunch by a Druze (Google it) woman in her home who spoke to us about her separation from her family which, because of political reasons, she hasn't been able to visit since 1967. It was a different and interesting perspective she gave us about life in this part of the world. Another great encounter was with a woman of the Circassian village of Kfar Kama (Google it). They are descendents of warriors from the Caucasus who were force from their homes by Russia in the mid-nineteenth century. They were originally Christian but when they were forced to go to the Ottoman Empire their hatred for Russia was so great that they converted to Islam. There are only 4,000 in the village but one of their traits is cleanliness – and Kfar Kama is *immaculate!* Her take on the political situation is 180 degrees different from the Druze woman and yet both are gentle, kind, sincere, hospitable people who obviously disagree on how things ought to be. Our week was a wonderful spiritual experience, a fascinating historical tour which brought so much of the scriptures to real life and a perplexing, political mix. It's complicated. It's all very complicated.

Week Seven

When Mark Twain described his trip through Europe and the Holy Land as “Innocents Abroad” he was talking about himself and his companions. Honestly, that term could somewhat describe our Tantur Ecumenical Group. I am always astonished at how “innocent” some of the participants are about certain things. Not only have several of them had little contact with Jews and no contact with Muslims, some have absolutely no idea of the diversity to be found in our own Christian Faith. Living for even a short time in the Holy Land has certainly opened a lot of eyes. “Innocence,” however, can also be described as political naiveté. For example, who would ever have thought that riding on a bus could get a person into trouble? For the past week Israeli Police have been stopping the busses we use to get to and from the Old City, checking I.D.’s and pulling people off the bus, holding the bus from proceeding and raising havoc with schedules. Two of our group, fair complexioned, white haired Australians in their 70’s were pulled off a bus, asked for their I.D. and questioned. The Israeli lady police officer, all of 22 or so, hadn’t a clue what a Catholic priest was or what they were doing here. The two were finally allowed to take the next bus but were steaming mad when they got back to Tantur! I can’t blame them, really. On Monday I walked into Bethlehem to get some antibiotics for a persistent cough (don’t need a prescription here) and got caught behind the separation wall because Israel decided to close it down. Only by showing my passport and explaining who I was, what I was doing, where I was living, why I was here, was I allowed to pass – but the Palestinians were forbidden to do so. That was very sad. I was told *“Israeli’s and Foreigners can do what they want. We have to stay behind this wall.”* I felt terrible. I wanted to cry. I should have gone back in and taken the long way around. If they couldn’t get through, why should I?

There are bright spots, though. We visited a place called “Tent of the Nations.” It is a farm which has been owned by a Palestinian Christian Family since 1916. The owners have the deed from the Ottoman Empire, reconfirmed by the British and then by Israel proving that they own the land. However, the farm is surrounded by settlements which are trying to take the land

away. It has cost the family over \$150,000 in court fees to fight the takeover, but the family refuses to be hateful or angry. In fact, they have turned their farm into “Tent of the Nations” to host volunteers and kids for summer camps and winter weekends to teach about peace and non-violence. “We refuse to be enemies” is their motto.

Friday evening we all attended a Sabbath Service in a local synagogue and were struck by the tone of the service. The singing was beautiful and the prayers and psalms used all focused on justice and peace for all of God’s people. After the service we were broken into small groups and taken to local families to celebrate Sabbath Dinner with a family. My group’s family had five kids, the youngest two and a half years old, the oldest 14. From all appearances the family seems rather poor but they are happy. We had some good discussion, got smiles out of the kids – and I think the most touching part of the dinner was at the blessing before we ate where the ritual calls for mom and dad to bless and kiss each child. Moms and dads – when was the last time you did that to your kids? THERE is the hope of the world!

Week Eight

The past week was a “free” week here at Tantur. Some of the group stayed around and visited Tel Aviv and other places in Jerusalem they hadn’t been, others went to Petra and I went to Rome. While there I had the opportunity to visit friends of mine from seminary days who are still living and working there, among them Cardinal Raymond Burke, who was, is and always will be a very nice man. I was shocked by the changes in Rome, however. It was crowded like I’ve never seen, busier than ever and prices have skyrocketed. I had a very simple Roman lunch one day (pasta, a glass of white wine, mineral water, a small veal cutlet) and paid \$50.00 for it. A can of soda now sells for \$5.00. A simple Roman pizza (the best in the world) is \$20.00! YIKES! Those of you planning on going on the Parish Pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi next year start saving your money now! One of my friends got me a ticket for the Wednesday Audience with the Holy Father. It was a good seat as I was on the “Special Seating” area about 100 yards from the Pope. I had a great view of his back! It was a small, intimate audience: me and approximately 100,000 other people! I’ve never seen such a crowd; and this was for a normal, Wednesday audience. The Holy Father packs them in. In his address on Wednesday he explained how the Church must be like Mary to bring Jesus to the world. Then he said: *“The Church is not a business! The Church is not just a social service agency! The Church is not an NGO! The Church must bring Jesus to the world and if it doesn’t the Church is DEAD!”* Applause erupted through the crowd. It really was exciting! His image is everywhere in Rome and the Roman people love him!

I also had the opportunity to visit all four of the Major Basilicas in Rome. Despite all the walking there and all the walking here in Israel I don’t seem to have lost a pound. I have discovered, too, that the cobblestones, hills and necessary walking in Rome were easier when I was 22 than I am now at 62. Both Cardinal Burke and I laughed at that as he has found the same at 65. *“Dennis, we’re old men,”* he said. I was unwilling to agree with him on that one so I just laughed (even though I knew it was true). I also took our two San Diego Seminarians out for

dinner one evening and visited with them. Please pray for them and their vocation that they be ordained when the time comes. If they are, we'll have two more *excellent* priests in our ranks.

I had forgotten what it was like to fly on an Italian Airline, though. Alitalia still serves a meal and once it's over it's like someone uncorked a champagne bottle! Everyone gets up in his/her seat and jabbars to the next door neighbor. Incredible! And both in Israel and Italy there is no order to get on the plane. They announce boarding and it's a mad dash for the gate with ensuing chaos on board as everyone tries to find the seat and stuff their carryon luggage in the bin above.

Arriving back in Israel was an experience, too. As usual, I got in the line with the most efficient Customs Officer (a young woman who looked to be about 22) who took 5 to 10 minutes with every person. She checked one person to 5 or 6 or 7 of the other officers. All I could do was stand in the line, fume, and pray continuously: "Lord, forgive my evil thoughts." At the end, though, I couldn't help myself. Once I was passed through I mentioned to her that at the rate she processed people the Messiah will be here again, or for the first time, depending on one's religion.

Week Nine

It's hard to believe that in a short two weeks my ten week sabbatical at Tantur will come to an end as I fly back to San Diego and pick up where I left off. We've already lost three of the group whose sabbaticals here came to an early conclusion.

One of them came late and left early (he has a year [*a year!* I'd go nuts!] so he's taking full advantage of it), another has six months, so from here he went to Spain to walk the Pilgrim Path of Santiago de Compostella (not for the faint of heart) before spending a semester at Berkeley and the third left on Friday to spend a week in Rome for a week (I told him to take lots of money) before returning home to the States. I'll be the next. Nevertheless, lectures and events here haven't slowed down a bit.

This past week's lectures focused on the life of the various Christian communities in the Holy Land. Fr. David Neuhaus, S.J., a convert from Judaism and the Vicar for Hebrew Speaking Catholics, told us of the plight of the many Christians who have come here but feel like strangers, not only in society, but also in the Church. The Catholic Church here is basically Arabic Speaking and tens of thousands of new, Catholic immigrants come from Lebanon, India and the Philippines. Many have been and worked here for years and have learned Hebrew, and their children also speak Hebrew but not Arabic (remember, I said this a society where for one the other doesn't exist so learning each others' languages doesn't happen), but Hebrew can be a barrier in a Arabic speaking congregation. Hence, Fr. Neuhaus is the Latin Patriarchate's Vicar for such congregations. He is working to help integrate all of the Catholic Communities together. In effect he faces the same challenges we do in San Diego by trying to integrate Spanish, Vietnamese, Eritrean and Somali speaking Catholics with English speaking congregations. It ain't easy!

For two days we visited Christian communities in the Northern West Bank and learned from the priests there what a struggle it can be to try and live a fruitful Christian life. However, if ecumenism doesn't register high in importance for the various church authorities in Jerusalem

it is alive and well in the villages and towns. Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Christians throughout the Holy Land treat each other as brothers and sisters, and work together to promote the ideals of the Gospel in the society in which they live. The priests with whom we met spoke of their struggles in coping with economic hardships posed by the separation wall, the blockage of roadways and the constant threats to their livelihood and security posed by Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. From the willful destruction of Palestinian vineyards and olive groves, to tapping into Palestinian water resources for the benefit of the settlements (and thus depriving the Palestinian villages of one of their most precious resources - water), we learned of the constant struggle to keep a Christian attitude to those who would do them harm. We were also told that where Christians and Muslims live together in the small villages, as they have for centuries, there is still neighborly good will and cooperation. *“Please, tell the world, we are human beings and not criminals”* is what one priest asked of us.

There is so much here that seems contradictory and food for reflection. There is certainly more than enough to lift up in prayer which, in the end, will be the only way that peace can come to this troubled land. It’s complicated. It’s all very complicated.

Week Ten

As you can tell from the heading the (Not So) Innocents abroad are no longer abroad – at least not all of them. Throughout the sabbatical program at the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur participants came and went. One was there for only a few weeks; another arrived a month later than the rest and expected to stay through Christmas (though upon arrival he was almost immediately diagnosed with leukemia and spent 40 days – how Biblical! – in the hospital. He said he didn’t know what was worse; the chemo therapy or the Israeli hospital food which consisted almost exclusively of yogurt, applesauce and canned tuna.); another left in mid-October and yet another left November 1st. My turn to leave came this past Friday and now I find myself sleeping once again in my own bed at home. One of the discussions we’d had in our lecture series was on what “home” meant for Jesus in His lifetime and how to relate that to ourselves. One person jokingly said “*Home is where my bank is!*” My home, on one hand, is rooted here in San Diego where I was born and raised but on the other hand now that the house in which we lived for so many years is no longer in the family “home” is wherever the bishop assigns me to serve. So, being back at San Rafael, it’s good to be home! Please know that during my ten weeks away you all had a special place in my prayers and at Mass, especially at the holy sites of our Faith.

Last week we celebrated Mass at the Tomb of Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Out of the 14 of us only 9 made it out of bed to leave Tantur at 4:15 a.m. to get to the church in time for Mass at 5:00 a.m. It was worth it, though, to walk the streets of the Old City without the merchants hawking their goods, tourists pausing to look and haggle over prices and pilgrims making their journey to the Holy Sepulchre. Being there so early gave me the chance to stop and pray at the site of Calvary where the crucifixion took place and to have the peace of mind for a reverent celebration of Mass at the Tomb. My prayer intentions that morning – at the *most* sacred sites of our Christian Faith – were for all of my family and friends at home. That, of course, meant all of the parishioners of San Rafael who over my 11 years as pastor have shown me the example of true discipleship in bringing Jesus to a hurting world. For all of you and your

witness I am more grateful than you know. To be honest, I cut my sabbatical time short by two weeks for one reason: I wanted to be home in order to celebrate Thanksgiving Day with you, my parish family.

My experiences over the past ten weeks have given me so much to think about and pray over, from a deeper understanding of the Scriptures to the problems facing the people of the Holy Land today, that I will be processing it all for a long time to come, especially as I read and re-read my daily journal of what we saw and did. The human tragedy of the political situation there is heart breaking and sobering. For those who are home in Israel or Palestine I pray that they will be able to find justice, peace and security. For me, at home here in San Diego, I am grateful to God for the opportunity to have been a small part of their lives for the past two and half months, and to have you to come home to.

I'm home now, though, and it's time for me to get back to work!