

The following was sent to us by Father Walter Cuenin, Pastor of Our Lady Help of Christians (in Newton) and former President of the Newton Interfaith Clergy Association. Father Cuenin is spending three months in Jerusalem studying and he wrote this while in a cybercafe in the Old City. ShalomBoston.com is grateful to Father Cuenin for sharing his thoughts and experience with us.

Reflections of a Catholic Priest Living in Jerusalem

(March 2001)

SHALOM FROM JERUSALEM!!

It is a pleasure to offer my reflections as a Catholic priest living here in Jerusalem. What a joy it is for me to be here in this sacred place. I am spending a three-month sabbatical in Jerusalem and using the time to visit many of the holy sites in Israel and the surrounding countries.

I am living at a place called Tantur. This is an ecumenical center located right near the checkpoint that leads into Bethlehem. In fact, the back door of our property opens into the Palestinian Authority area and the front door into Israel proper. This unique position gives us the opportunity to appreciate the complexity and challenges of making peace in this land. We are blessed to host many conferences of people who are actively engaged in peacemaking and that gives us hope. The situation presently is difficult but I personally feel very safe here. Our constant prayer is for the peace of Jerusalem.

One of the areas of study that I have been working on is the new approach of the Catholic Church with regard to Judaism. I say new - it actually begins with the Second Vatican Council of 1965 - but it is only now beginning to filter down through the Church. The issue centers around a statement made at the Council and reaffirmed by Pope John Paul II that the covenant made by God with the Jewish people has never been revoked and remains to this day. This is an extraordinary statement and, in fact, some would say the most significant of the Council. For almost two thousand years Christianity always saw itself as the people of the "new" covenant and that the covenant of the Jewish people had been surpassed by Jesus. This kind of thinking has been a factor in the terrible history of the Church in its relations with the Jewish people. After all, if the covenant with the Jews was fulfilled in Christ then where does that leave the Jews? This statement would seem to signal a new appreciation for the Jewish faith that has never been a part of Christian history. We have been trying to explore the potential of this new thinking. How will the Church of the future explain the meaning of Christ for Christian people and still maintain the special place that the Jewish people have in God's plan? This is not a simple matter but I think it contains much promise for future interfaith dialogue.

In addition to this study we have also been working on a greater understanding of Jesus as a Jew. There is a tremendous interest today in Christian studies to understand first-century Judaism and to situate Jesus more accurately in that world. For example, so many of the passages of the Gospels make Jesus seem very hostile to the Pharisees and, at times, to

Jewish prayer and ritual. Most Christian scholars today see those passages as not coming from the historical Jesus who was faithful as a Jew but from later first century CE tensions reflected back into the time of Jesus. These studies are helping us to appreciate the Jewishness of Jesus and, in fact, of the early Jews who followed him. This is not to deny our differences but to value the Jewish faith of Jesus as reflected in his prayer and teachings. It is, of course, very special to do this in the land where Jesus lived. We were in the Galilee a few weeks ago and it was so moving to see the Sea of Galilee, which was such an important part of the ministry of Jesus. The last time I was there was with a group from Boston of Catholics and Jews, with Cardinal Law and Rabbi Sam Chiel of Temple Emanuel of Newton. I recall vividly how special that trip was as our two communities prayed together and cherished the beauty of this holy land.

This time in Israel has helped confirm within me a deeper appreciation of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people. I have always been active in interfaith work but I know that I will be ever more committed to that endeavor when I return to Newton in May. Prayers and blessings to all of you from Israel. Let us pray together for the peace of Jerusalem.
SHALOM!

Father Walter Cuenin, Pastor, Our Lady Help of Christians, Newton, Massachusetts.