

# Holy Land Pilgrimage: A Diary

George Weigel

*Saturday/Sunday, March 18-19, 2000*

It's not quite Egeria's *Diary of a Pilgrimage*, but Evelyn Waugh's *Helena* is terrific reading, or rereading, on an overnight flight to the Holy Land: a resolutely gritty, profoundly anti-Gnostic rendering of Constantine's mother and her search for the true Cross, which, on Waugh's telling of the tale, was driven by the simple, sturdy conviction that the truth of Christianity must be tied to a certain place, a defined time, and real lives. Helena went to the Holy Land, in a word, because of a *sacramental* conviction—that in the Christian scheme of things, salvation history is not merely an idea; rather, the stuff of creation is transformed by grace into the instruments of redemption, right before our eyes. (*Helena* is also, like every other Waugh novel, wickedly funny, which helps on a ten-and-a-half hour flight.)

I don't know whether John Paul II has ever read *Helena*; I rather doubt it. But he's coming to the Holy Land for the same reason Constantine's mother did. As he put it in a June 1999 letter to all those preparing to celebrate the Great Jubilee of 2000, "To go in a spirit of prayer from one place to another, from one city to another, in the area marked especially by God's intervention, helps us not only to live our life as a journey, but also gives us a vivid sense of a God who has gone before us and leads us on, who Himself set out on man's path, a God who does not look down on us from on high, but who became our traveling companion."

That is what the jubilee year is about, and like the dowager empress Helena, John Paul II, the evangeli-

cal pilgrim, is determined to remind the world of it—to make the world look, hard, at the stuff of its redemption.

On the drive into Jerusalem from the airport, I was struck by the flags on the lampposts: Vatican and Israeli flags, side-by-side, a sight that many here (and elsewhere) never expected to see. Something epic is afoot.

I haven't been in Jerusalem in nine years and the city has changed, in some cases dramatically. The massive new Mamilla development near the Jaffa Gate, the last of former Mayor Teddy Kollek's great building projects, seems about half-done, and not altogether successful, architecturally or commercially. I walked through it into the Old City, wondering whether I would remember how to get to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I did, and here, too, there were changes, notably the new interior dome over the edicule that holds the sepulcher itself. It's a bit garish, in the modern Italian style, but one comes to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher not for the aesthetics, but to pray. And amidst the cacophony of Sunday afternoon tourists and pilgrims it remains perhaps the easiest place in the world to pray: not so much formally, but as a matter of practicing the presence.

Back at the Jerusalem Hilton, overlooking the Old City, my new colleagues of NBC, MSNBC, and New York's WNBC have been transforming the tenth-floor presidential suite into a combination newsroom-and-outdoor studio, and chaos prevails. The local journalistic chatter, two days before the Pope's arrival, is about security. Israel is mounting the largest security operation in its history for the papal pilgrim, dubbed "Operation Old Friend," and the word is that seventy pounds of explosives were found last week in a house controlled by Hamas extremists. Friday's *Jerusalem Post* has a huge picture of a Pope-float being made for a

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GEORGE WEIGEL is Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and author of *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*. He served as a commentator for MSNBC and NBC during the papal visit to Jerusalem.

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Purim parade this week, and I'm told that Pope costumes are a hot item among some young Purim celebrants. Semtex and Pope-floats, ancient shrines and modern flags: welcome to Jerusalem in the year of Our Lord, 2000.

*Monday, March 20*

**F**urther explorations in the Israeli press and a few phone calls to friends and colleagues suggest that an incredible number of personal, ethnic, religious, ecumenical, interreligious, organizational, and, of course, political agendas are at play in the last twenty-four hours before John Paul arrives. Spin is everywhere. Some upstart local religious leaders are competing for market-share in what they assume will be a growing interreligious dialogue after the visit. The established figures—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—are busy trying to frame the papal visit according to their respective organizational and political agendas. The politicians, by contrast, seem relatively restrained thus far. In one sense, this entire hermeneutical rumble—trying to define what it all means before the Pope even lands—is a tribute to John Paul II, the man whose blessing everyone, or almost everyone, seems to crave. On the other hand, the struggle for interreligious turf, ecumenical precedence, and political advantage misses the essential point of the Pope's visit.

That's what I tried to stress in my first segment on MSNBC today: this is a *pilgrimage*, and like everything else John Paul II does, it has an evangelical purpose. John Paul is not coming to the Holy Land to say to the world, "Look at me"; he's coming to say, "Look at Jesus Christ." I also underlined the deeply personal meaning of this pilgrimage for the Pope. In the first weeks of his pontificate, he had had a bright idea: he should spend his first Christmas as Pope in Bethlehem. Mass consternation ensued among the traditional managers of popes—Bethlehem was in disputed territory; the Holy See didn't have diplomatic relations with any state in the area; the logistics would be impossible on such short notice; popes simply didn't *do* this sort of thing. For one of the few times in twenty-one years, John Paul let his evangelical instincts be trumped by the ingrained cautiousness of his diplomats.

But for years afterwards, he would ask them, whenever the subject turned to the Middle East, *Quando mi permetterete di andare?*—"When will you let me go?" In the 1994 apostolic letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, he floated the idea of a pilgrimage to the great sites of biblical history: Ur, home of Abraham, father of believers; Mt. Sinai, site of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments; the Holy Land; Damascus, to mark the conversion of St. Paul; Athens and the Areopagus,

to recall Paul's sermon on the "unknown God," which John Paul has long thought an apt metaphor for the Church's situation in the modern world. And still those in the Vatican whose professional responsibility it is to fret continued to, well, fret: how could it be arranged, how would he navigate the minefields of Mideast politics, who could make sense of the logistical nightmares? Finally, in that June 1999 letter, the Pope signaled that he had waited long enough, and simply announced that he was going.

The Iraqis blocked the Ur pilgrimage, demanding that the Pope defy the UN's no-fly zones; the Pope settled for a day of "spiritual pilgrimage" at the Vatican, visually centered on Rublev's icon of the angelic visitation to Abraham. Sinai, however, went off beautifully in February, despite some chippiness by the Greek Orthodox leaders at St. Catherine's Monastery, who declined to pray with the Bishop of Rome. Now, tomorrow, John Paul II will be a pilgrim in the Holy Land. And despite my media colleagues' mantra about the "frail and failing pontiff"—I've been arguing that the real story is how much he does at seventy-nine years old with a form of Parkinson's disease and a leg that doesn't work too well—I think it's fitting that he's coming as an old man. Because what will happen here is the existential confirmation of things the Pope has said and written for decades: with obvious effort, he is going to bear witness to what he believes is true, and what he has taught as the truth, about Christianity, its relationship to Judaism, its respect for other world religions, its commitment to human rights, peace, and justice.

**I** was impressed by my MSNBC colleagues during our first segments working together. They are smart, friendly, and maintain an amazing professional calm amidst what seems to my amateur eye nothing short of bedlam. Chris Jansing, the anchor, is also willing to let her "anchor buddy" (as I'm known in the argot) spin things out for a decent length of time. She understands that this isn't an event whose truth is readily captured in sound-bites—and after months on the road covering presidential politics in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Michigan, and elsewhere, I daresay she finds that a relief.

In Amman, where John Paul stopped for a day en route to the Holy Land, the papal Mass was well-attended. The Pope's subsequent meeting with the Jordanian Catholic hierarchy was a reminder of what the term "universal pastor" means. Some bishops in the West may resent the primacy of the Bishop of Rome; for bishops here, trying to keep small churches afloat in a Muslim sea, the universal pastoral responsibility of the Pope is a lifesaver. On a slightly different plane, the Jordanians and the Palestinians in what is

now Israeli-occupied territory on the West Bank are embroiled in a public controversy over the precise site of Jesus' baptism; one doesn't risk a charge of impiousness by suggesting that the argument has more to do with future tourist dollars than with the fine points of biblical archaeology.

In between MSNBC segments I had dinner with Father Michael McGarry, a graduate school classmate and the director of the Tantur Theological Institute. We went to a Palestinian restaurant, Philadelphia, in East Jerusalem, and while the food was superb, I was reminded during the drive that beyond the Damascus Gate lies a different world—at 7:30 at night it was largely lifeless and virtually empty. A poster in the restaurant displayed a photo of John Paul II and Yassir Arafat superimposed on a photo of Jerusalem, with the headline in English, "Welcome to the Palestinian Holy Land." It was a harbinger of another form of spin and a rather expansive reading of the Oslo peace accords.

### *Tuesday, March 21*

At breakfast this morning I met an immensely learned and kindly rabbi, the friend of an NBC colleague. The rabbi admired John Paul II greatly and asked what I thought the Pope had in mind for the future of Catholic-Jewish relations. I replied that the Pope, while welcoming the achievements of the thirty-five years since Vatican II, now wanted to move the dialogue to a new, theological level. The rabbi became obviously uncomfortable. When I asked whether I had just heard alarm bells going off in his mind, he smiled and said that indeed I had. When I asked why, he said he thought that the kind of theologically enriched, religiously focused dialogue John Paul II envisioned was simply impossible. When I asked why that was the case he replied, simply and without rancor, "Because your sacred text is anti-Semitic."

The obvious next question was what *that* meant, and my interlocutor cited the Gospel of John and its multiple references to "the Jews" in their confrontation with Jesus. I replied that two hundred years of New Testament scholarship had demonstrated that many of the Gospel accounts were written in the polemical context of a bitter family feud, one that eventually led to the parting of the ways between what became Christianity and what became rabbinic Judaism. Moreover, I suggested, the phrase "the Jews" in John's Gospel simply couldn't be read as if this were the minutes of a blackballing at a 1928 meeting in an upscale New York men's club. The rabbi seemed struck by this formulation, but then said that, while he accepted what I had just reported, surely this was not

the way the majority of Catholics read the New Testament. I assured him that, when the people of my suburban Washington parish heard "the Jews" during the Good Friday liturgy, they were not hearing what he feared they heard.

This conversation gave personal texture to some polling data I had been reading before and after my arrival in Jerusalem. Fifty-six percent of Israelis, one poll reported, have no idea that the Catholic Church publicly condemns anti-Semitism and works against it. Very few understand the change in the Catholic relationship to Judaism since Vatican II. Several local Jewish leaders have suggested that Jewish ignorance about Christianity is a scandal and an impediment to interfaith relations that can no longer go unaddressed. This, I suspect, has been a problem for years, but it's a side benefit of the papal visit that these things can now be said publicly. The Anti-Defamation League, to its great credit, took out two-page ads in several Israeli papers yesterday, letting the Pope speak for himself in a series of quotable quotes on Jews, Judaism, the abiding covenant with the Jewish people, the State of Israel, and the Holocaust. These citations are a welcome addition to the mix, but that it had to be done tells us something about the imperatives of the immediate future—and not just in Israel.

When the Pope's Royal Jordanian Airbus landed at Ben-Gurion Airport this afternoon, the arrival ceremony confirmed what those flags on the Jerusalem lampposts had suggested: this will be a week of icons. The Pope waving a hand in salute at the Israeli flag; the Pope listening attentively as "Hatikvah," Israel's national anthem, is played; the Pope being welcomed to the Jewish state as an honored guest by its president and prime minister; the Pope reviewing an Israeli Defense Force honor guard—these are very powerful signals for John Paul's Jewish interlocutors that things have changed, dramatically, in Catholic-Jewish relations. What the Pope and Israeli President Ezer Weizmann said was fine (although there will certainly be discussion in the future about Weizmann's blunt political reference to Jerusalem as Israel's eternal capital). But the iconography was crucial. The Pope has been saying things about Jews and Catholics for two decades. These images are confirming that what was said was what was meant.

### *Wednesday, March 22*

John Paul spent the entire day in Bethlehem, now under the control of the Palestinian Authority (the "PA," as everyone here calls it), and at the Dehaishe refugee camp. In an interview yesterday with Tom Brokaw, Arafat had insisted, again, that St. Peter was a

"Palestinian." I remarked to a colleague that that was true, in the sense that Rabbi Gamaliel and Rabbi Akiba were "Palestinians," but I didn't think that this was the point Arafat was trying to make.

It was, however, the first episode in what became a day-long effort to use the Pope's presence in the PA for the PLO's political purposes. John Paul's measured (and Vatican-standard) remarks about the importance of a Palestinian "homeland" were immediately translated by Suha Arafat, wife of the PLO chairman, into a "clear message for an independent Palestinian state" (although the word "state" did not appear in the Pope's text—deliberately, as I later learned). The papal call for justice for the refugees at the Dehaishe camp was quickly spun by Palestinian commentators into a Vatican demand for a "right of return" for all those displaced by the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948 (although the phrase "right of return" was not used, again deliberately). Arafat himself got the day off to a politicized start by welcoming the Pope to Palestine "and to holy Jerusalem, the eternal capital of Palestine." The tangled question of Jerusalem's international legal status and future notwithstanding, this claim for a city that has never been the capital of an Islamic state was of a piece with Arafat's overreach on the "Palestinian St. Peter" and his 1995 Christmas reference to Bethlehem as the city of the "Palestinian Jesus."

It's difficult for reporters accustomed to covering political stories to understand that, when the Pope speaks of justice and human rights, he's speaking as a pastor, not as a politician or negotiator. Then there was a mild flap over the Pope's kissing a bowl of Palestinian soil on his arrival in Bethlehem: did this mean he was recognizing a Palestinian state (as the PA spin machine quickly insisted)? Joaquín Navarro-Valls, the Pope's able press spokesman, ended that line of speculation with a simple statement: "It would have been very strange of the Pope not to have kissed the earth at the place where Christ was born."

Moreover, the Pope's words about justice for a Palestinian people whose "torment is before the eyes of the world" and had "gone on too long" were just as plausibly aimed at the leadership of the Palestinian Authority as well as at other states in the region. The PA is a mess. The economy is a shambles and corruption is rampant; one of our camera crews, in order to shoot film in Bethlehem, had to get ten different press passes, meaning that ten different PA officials or offices had to be paid off. Christians can't buy land or other forms of property in the PA—not by law, but because it's simply not done, and it's well understood that any attempt to do so will bring retribution. So the economic pressure on Palestinian Christians increases steadily, leading to further Christian migration from

the Holy Land, a major Vatican concern. The large-scale corruption in the PA was also, I suspect, on the Pope's mind when he spoke at Dehaishe: corruption is not simply lining the pockets of PA officials, it's blocking any serious economic development efforts for these refugees. Whatever signals it may have sent politically, however, the papal visit to the camp was an enormous success in human terms. One relief official told a visiting American bishop that the Pope's presence had given the refugees a measure of hope for the first time in decades.

One has to feel terribly sorry for ordinary Palestinians. Pawns of other Arab states' anti-Israeli politics for years, but now on the verge of achieving a state of their own (which everyone I talked to expects to be declared this year), they are saddled with a mendacious, corrupt, and inept political leadership. The day-long PA spin control operation sat poorly with a lot of the press and with Holy See officials who have been insisting that this is a *pilgrimage*. The condition of Christians in the PA also puts the recent Vatican/Palestinian agreement in the proper perspective: by insisting on a religious freedom provision in the agreement (a clause the PA first resisted, but on which the Vatican dug in its heels), the Holy See has created a legal situation in which it can be of some assistance to Palestinian Catholics when the Palestinian state, which will likely be unfriendly to them in various ways, is a fact.

In the midst of the Palestinian spin, Israeli counter-spin, and Vatican aggravation at PA hamhandedness, John Paul's wonderful homily in Bethlehem got little attention. "The joy announced by the angel" to the shepherds of Bethlehem "is not a thing of the past," the Pope said. "It is a joy of today—the eternal today of God's salvation which embraces all time, past, present, and future. At the dawn of the new millennium, we are called to see more clearly that time has meaning because here Eternity entered history and remains with us forever. . . . Because it is always Christmas in Bethlehem, every day is Christmas in the hearts of Christians."

This afternoon, a WNBC reporter told me that the Israeli government had confirmed that its security people had asked the Pope to wear a bulletproof vest in Nazareth and he had refused. What did I make of this? I said that something similar had been proposed after the assassination attempt in 1981 and had met with the same response. This was not, I told the New York audience, papal chutzpah; it was religious conviction. Karol Wojtyła has believed for more than six decades that he is not in charge of his own life. To wear a bulletproof vest would be to deny the conviction that makes him who and what he is—the conviction

tion that God is in charge of his life, which is the source of John Paul's fearlessness and freedom. The Pope is, of course, heavily protected by police and other security forces. What local authorities do to avoid having a wounded or dead Pope on their hands is beyond his control.

*Thursday, March 23*

This was a day of solemn drama and wrenching emotion. It began with a private Mass for the papal party in the Cenacle, the "Upper Room"—the successor of Peter and his collaborators concelebrating at the traditional site of the institution of the Eucharist and the priesthood, the place where the Church was born on Pentecost. Then, after a meeting with the chief Ashkenazic rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, and the chief Sephardic rabbi, Eliahu Bakshi-Doron, the Pope went to the Israeli presidential residence for a conversation with President Weizmann. And from there, John Paul II was driven to the Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem.

This unforgettable visit was preceded by weeks of speculation and agitation: "How far would the Pope go?" Attempts to explain that this was not a zero-sum negotiation in which one side's gain was another's loss got little traction amidst the rhetorical grenades being freely tossed about. A few weeks before the papal pilgrimage, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg had told an Israeli audience that Karol Wojtyla had been passively acquiescent during the wartime slaughter of Polish Jewry. A little later, James Carroll had lectured at David Hartman's Jerusalem institute, arguing that the real issue here was to jettison the "theology" that had "made the Holocaust possible"—presumably a reference to Carroll's bizarre notion, first floated in the *New Yorker*, that Vatican I's definition of papal infallibility had caused the Shoah. More sober souls, among them the ADL's David Rosen, have been quietly explaining in recent days that a papal "apology" for Pius XII is simply not in the cards. But what has gone largely unexamined is the question of how a playwright's undocumented speculation—Pius XII's alleged indifference to the Holocaust as portrayed by Rolf Hochhuth in *The Deputy*—has become, in many minds, a *given*.

It was not an atmosphere that seemed appropriate to the seriousness of the papal pilgrimage or the gravity of what Yad Vashem represents, and concerns were expressed yesterday and this morning that the entire visit could self-destruct today. In the event, however, John Paul took all of this to an entirely different level in a simple ceremony of awesome solemnity that reduced to ashes the endless "how far" chatter.

Joaquín Navarro-Valls once asked John Paul whether he ever cried. "Not outside," the Pope replied. No one who knows him could doubt that the Pope was crying inside as he walked slowly toward the eternal flame in Yad Vashem's Hall of Remembrance and then bent his head in silent prayer. No one could doubt that, in his mind's eye, he was seeing the boyhood friends from Wadowice who had perished in the death camps. No one who knows how the experience of the Nazi Occupation had shaped Karol Wojtyla's determination to defend human dignity could doubt that he was hearing the jackboots on the streets of Cracow again.

The Pope, a shared history etched in his face, bent in prayer over the eternal flame at Yad Vashem—here was the second icon indelibly imprinted on the memory of the modern world and on the consciousness of Catholics and Jews. Here was another indication that things could never be the same again.

John Paul began his brief address with Psalm 131 ("I have become like a broken vessel. . . . But I trust in you, O Lord") and then said what ought to have been said to so many of those trying to spin the papal visit to Yad Vashem before the Pope had even arrived: "In this place of memories, the mind and heart and soul feel an extreme need for silence. Silence in which to remember. Silence in which to try to make some sense of the memories which come flooding back. Silence because there are no words strong enough to deplore the terrible tragedy of the Shoah."

Then, after reminding everyone that remembrance was "*for a purpose*, namely, to ensure that never again will evil prevail, as it did for the millions of innocent victims of Nazism," John Paul, knowing that too many Christians had become ensnared in that web of evil, offered an act of repentance from the heart: "As Bishop of Rome and Successor of the Apostle Peter, I assure the Jewish people that the Catholic Church, motivated by the gospel law of love and by no political considerations, is deeply saddened by the hatred, acts of persecution, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews by Christians at any time and in any place." Most especially including, it was clear, the times and places memorialized at Yad Vashem. Prime Minister Ehud Barak replied with a moving statement that neither ignored nor pursued the arguments about relative responsibilities for the Shoah; like the Pope, the prime minister understood that this was too solemn a moment for anything other than remembrance and a mutual commitment to a different future.

The weight of history became almost unbearable when the Pope walked slowly across the Hall of Remembrance to greet seven Holocaust survivors. But

here, too, it seemed, was another icon: the Pope was not receiving the survivors, he was honoring their experience and their memories by walking, with difficulty, to meet them. It was a gesture of respect that did not go unnoticed or unremarked. Our NBC/MSNBC newsroom and studio, which was usually a bedlam eighteen hours a day, fell completely silent.

A few days later, an Israeli friend, a soldier-intellectual who has seen a lot in his life, called late at night. "I just had to tell you," he said, "that my wife and I cried throughout the Pope's visit to Yad Vashem. This was wisdom, humaneness, and integrity personified. Nothing was missing; nothing more needed to be said."

Later that afternoon, a tripartite interreligious meeting, on which John Paul had insisted, illustrated just how difficult "the dialogue" is, in and around Jerusalem. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem had refused to participate; Chairman Arafat had delegated Sheik Taysir Tamimi, an Islamic judge from the PA, to be the Muslim spokesman. Tamimi and Rabbi Lau flanked the Pope on a dais at the Pontifical Notre Dame Institute. Lau began by speaking of the need for peace and dialogue in everyday life; then, as the *New York Times'* Alessandra Stanley wrote, he "put an abrupt end to both by thanking John Paul for 'your recognition of Jerusalem as [Israel's] united, eternal capital city.'" The Pope had not done that—the Holy See, which takes no position on the question of sovereignty in Jerusalem, nevertheless insists that access to the city's holy places and their integrity be secured by an "international statute"—and someone in the audience shouted, "The Pope did not recognize Jerusalem." Things got more volatile when Tamimi welcomed the Pope, in Arabic, as "the guest of the Palestinian people on the land of Palestine, in the city of holy Jerusalem, eternal capital of Palestine," and was met by loud applause by the audience. He went on to insist, in a rather frenzied rhetorical style, that there could be no peace in the region until all of "Palestine" was united under "President Yassir Arafat"; more applause followed. The moderator, Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein, tried to save the meeting by reminding those present that they were supposed to have come "as religious people who can put aside our politics." John Paul spoke briefly and pointedly of religion as "the enemy of exclusion and discrimination, of hatred and rivalry, of violence and conflict," but shortly after he finished, Sheik Tamimi abruptly got up and left the meeting. It was later explained by a Vatican official that the sheik had leaned over to the Pope before departing and explained that he had a "previous engagement." One had to wonder precisely what engagement trumped the Pope in the sheik's mind.

*Friday, March 24*

I managed to get away for a couple of hours of pilgrim-time this morning: the Cenacle, the Dormition Abbey, the Holy Sepulcher again. Walking through the Old City from Zion Gate through the Jewish Quarter to the Christian Quarter, I couldn't help noticing the ubiquitous cell phones and the refreshing number of black faces, the result of the ingathering of Ethiopian Jews.

The papal Mass at Korazim today, on the Mount of Beatitudes, was the largest gathering in the history of the State of Israel: over 100,000 young people, from all over the world, in a kind of mini-World Youth Day. A local news agency reported that a bulletproof screen had been erected around the altar platform, noting that this was the first time this had been done at a papal Mass "since Detroit in 1987"—which is no compliment, I suppose, to Korazim. The Pope was in fine form, voice strong and clear, as he so often is with teenagers. Why, WNBC asked, did they find him so attractive? Because, I suggested, he didn't pander to them but challenged them to moral heroism. John Paul's own "sermon on the mount" also asked the youngsters to be "joyful witnesses and convinced apostles," the evangelists of the twenty-first century. A television producer for a network that will go unnamed asked me, "How long has the Catholic Church been into evangelism?" "About nineteen hundred and sixty-five years," I replied.

After the Mass, John Paul went to Tabgha, to pray at the site of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, and then to Peter's house at Capernaum, which has been excavated in recent years. One could sense the wonder in John Paul's face: here was Peter's 263rd successor, praying at Peter's house. One also got the distinct impression here, as at Bethlehem (where the Pope managed to be by himself for a few minutes in the Grotto of the Nativity), that the best moments of this trip for John Paul are the moments when he can be a pilgrim and simply pray. They are, necessarily, fewer than he would like. But they are unmistakably intense.

*Saturday, March 25*

John Paul II celebrated the Solemnity of the Annunciation today at the traditional site of the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary of Nazareth. This part of the pilgrimage had been preceded by high tension. An incomprehensible decision by the Israeli government to grant a permit for the building of a mosque in the plaza outside the Basilica of the Annunciation had led to riots and festering ill will. The mosque decision—which, as one Vatican official

put it privately, would lay the basilica under “permanent siege”—remains under review and the Holy See is determined to reverse it. For today, however, this controversy was not the center of local attention. John Paul was almost crushed by the exultant congregation as he walked into the basilica; his secretary, the ever-calm Bishop Stanislaw Dziwisz, fended off hands trying to touch the Pope from left and right by a judicious distribution of rosaries. Once again, the beauty of the liturgy and its location notwithstanding, John Paul was clearly most at home when he managed some time for private prayer in the Grotto of the Annunciation, doubtless repeating the *Fiat voluntas tua* that has characterized his own life and Marian spirituality.

Later today, on MSNBC, Rabbi James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee took on the question of whether the Pope should wear his pectoral cross when he visits the Western Wall tomorrow—the latest local controversy, it seems. Rudin was perfect. In “real interreligious dialogue,” he said, “we respect the other for what he is and we begin the conversation from there.” Off camera, Rudin told me that the same issue had come up when plans were being finalized for John Paul’s historic visit to the Synagogue of Rome in 1986. There, it seemed, the proscription on crosses is so severe that ushers would walk through the congregation and rap the knees of anyone caught crossing their legs. Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff was beseeched by some of his congregants to explain the situation to the Pope and ask him not to wear his pectoral cross. Toaff agreed, and went to see the Pope. John Paul said, in so many words, “Look, if I were coming to the Synagogue of Rome as a tourist I’d be happy to wear jeans. But I’m coming as the Bishop of Rome and the universal pastor of the Catholic Church, and to make that and all it means unmistakably clear I have to dress as I always do.” Toaff came out of the meeting and told his startled followers that he had indeed raised the point with the Pope and they had both agreed: the Pope should wear his pectoral cross.

While the Pope was lost in prayer this evening at the Church of the Nations in the Garden of Gethsemane, Father Mike McGarry celebrated Mass for the MSNBC Catholics in our own “upper room”—in this instance, my quarters at the Jerusalem Hilton. Leaving Gethsemane, John Paul called on the Greek Orthodox patriarch, Diodoros I, at his residence. What could have resulted in another unpleasant ecumenical scene was transformed when the Pope embraced and kissed the ailing patriarch, who remained seated. John Paul insisted that “only by being reconciled among themselves can Christians play their role in making Jerusalem a city of peace for all people.” The

Pope then spontaneously proposed that all those present say the Lord’s Prayer together, each in his own language. By coming to Diodoros, John Paul lived out the truth of what he had suggested in *Ut Unum Sint* and elsewhere: that he really burns to pray with the Orthodox, and that he doesn’t imagine the Bishop of Rome playing the jurisdictional role in the East that he currently does in the West.

### *Sunday, March 26*

John Paul II, walking eighty-six slow steps to the Western Wall this morning, praying there, and, like millions of pious Jews, leaving behind a prayer-petition: here was the third great icon for the future of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. The letter the Pope left repeated what had been said at the liturgical “cleansing of the Church’s conscience” in Rome on the First Sunday of Lent—“God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer. And asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant.” But now it was being said *here*, in this singular place, by a man whose reverence for that place could be read in his whole demeanor. It was another image driving home the point that something fundamental had changed, irreversibly, in the relationship between Catholicism and living Judaism.

Prior to this, John Paul had visited the Haram al-Sharif, the Temple Mount, where he met a delegation of Muslim leaders. The Grand Mufti, Sheik Ikrima Sabri, read the Pope a lecture and told him bluntly that Jerusalem is “eternally bonded to Islam.” According to papal spokesman Navarro-Valls, the Pope was unaware that the Mufti had been engaging in Holocaust denial and Jew-baiting in a series of interviews during the weekend. John Paul’s response to the Mufti’s lecture, that he considered Jerusalem the “holy city par excellence” and “a part of the common patrimony” of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, did not seem to make much impression on the Mufti’s politicized supersessionism.

From the Pope’s point of view, the Mass at the Holy Sepulcher, which he celebrated after his visit to the Western Wall, was the climax of the entire pilgrimage. Here, he had written in his June 1999 letter, “I intend to immerse myself in prayer bearing in my heart the whole Church.” As it happened, John Paul was not satisfied with one immersion in prayer during that Eucharist at the tomb of Christ. Later in the day, he asked to be permitted to come back, privately, and

after the security people had recovered from the shock, the Pope spent another half-hour as a pilgrim, not only at the tomb, but climbing up the difficult stone steps to the eleventh and twelfth Stations of the Cross, in order to be able to pray at Calvary. It was another icon, the Pope living out the truth to which he had committed himself decades before: Jesus Christ as the answer to the question that is every human life.

As John Paul's El Al 747 took off from Ben-Gurion Airport this evening, I couldn't help recall what one Jerusalem interreligious leader had called, a week ago, "the growing unease about the chances of [the Pope's] success." Yet John Paul had done it again. By being what he had said all along he intended to be—a pilgrim—he lifted the entire week above the quarrels, conflicts, hatreds, and pettiness that are the daily bread of affliction in the Holy Land. What a remarkable thing it was, one television colleague said, to see an adult among the squabbling children of the Middle East. But more than maturity has been on display here for the past seven days. The Pope drew the response he did because of his transparent faith.

The effects of this pilgrimage will likely be enduring, perhaps even epic. The sea change in Catholic Jewish relations has been registered by people who may have heard something about it previously, but have now seen it embodied. One can only hope that the Palestinian people, seeing what mature leadership looks like, will be able to demand it of their own leaders. As for the impact on the Catholic Church I'd venture the guess that this pilgrimage will, one day, loom large in the deliberations of the conclave that chooses John Paul's successor—many years from now, I devoutly hope. Even as the Pope was walking in the footsteps of Christ in Galilee and Judea, middle-level curial bureaucrats and disgruntled liberal Catholic intellectuals were putting out the word to the press that the next Pope would be an elderly Italian. But surely, after this week, something else has been decisively clarified. The overriding question in the next conclave will not be, "Where was so-and-so born?" It will have to be, "Who can offer the world the kind of leadership we saw in Jerusalem in March 2000?" ET

### Morning Haiku

Morning tea: the steam  
is filled with a holy ghost.  
Sunlight floods the room.

Morning light comes down  
through the cross-patterned window.  
Eyes half-closed, in shade,

I lift up my eyes  
to the cross-shadowed morning.  
Orisons, arise.

Craig Payne