

Fr. Jason's Wishful Thinking... Israel Pilgrimage, Part III

In the last installment of Wishful Thinking, I spoke about our last day near Galilee and our first day near Jerusalem. We went to Bethlehem to shop, as well as Mass at Shepherd's Field, and visited the cave of the Nativity. We returned to the hotel and some of our group went with me for the pastor's optional tour that included our first look at the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre.

On **Saturday, September 8th**, our group took most of the morning at the Mount of Olives. We were one of the first groups to arrive at the Garden of Gethsemane, which worked in our favor. The garden is surrounded by two fences... an external fence to keep people out of the property when the grounds are closed, and then an internal fence on the perimeter of the garden to protect the olive trees. Visitors walk along the perimeter of the garden. Surprisingly, six to eight of the olive trees still exist from the time of Christ. You can touch one of them through the interior fence, which we did! The Church of All Nations next door is built over the rock where Jesus prayed intensely and sweat drops of blood. The interior of the church is dark, because it is a sober place in the life of Jesus. I think that all of us were really touched by God during this moment of our trip. It was the place that He decided to hit our hearts and souls with grace, understanding, and affirmation. We prayed at the rock for a moment, and then prepared to have Mass. The church is arranged with an altar rail around the sanctuary and the rock, so that it can be roped off for private Mass. Our group managed to fit perfectly, sitting on benches around the altar and the rock. When I started Mass, I was very conscious of this force radiating from the floor. It was a clear sign that I should take off my shoes to celebrate Mass as I was standing on very holy ground. I became very nervous during Mass, plus it was hot inside the church, groups were coming in and out of the building while I was doing the homily, and I started to sweat.

And then, the most amazing thing happened during the consecration. I showed the chalice to the group during the words of institution ("Take this all of you, and drink from it...") as I normally do. I then bowed down and looked into the chalice at the Precious Blood. And there, in the middle of the Precious Blood, reflecting back at me in vivid white, was the image of Christ on the crucifix, as if I was looking down on the scene from above. I was puzzled as to why I was seeing this, as I had never doubted the Real Presence. I wondered if I should stop Mass right there and show it to Deacon Leon and the group, but considering that I was a guest in this church and the Franciscan friars were listening to Mass and monitoring the church for suspicious visitors and events, I decided to carry on with the Mass. I elevated the chalice into the air, and put it on the altar. The image was still there. I placed the pall on top of the chalice and continued the Eucharistic Prayer. The image was no longer there when it was time to hand the chalice to Deacon Leon for the doxology. As I think about this miracle inside of a miracle, I have concluded that God wanted to affirm my faith and it was His way of approving the installation of the Eucharistic miracle exhibit in the old church.

After Mass, Deacon Leon looked at me in the sacristy and asked, "What happened during Mass? I could tell by your face that something happened..." So I told him about my experience. He said, "This is a really special place. You took your shoes off, and I felt that strange sensation that we were on holy ground."

We left Gethsemane and traveled further up the hill to the Pater Noster Church. This is the place where the apostles asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, and He recited the words of the Our Father prayer to them. Along the walls of the whole complex are ceramic tiles with the words of the Our Father in every possible language. We ate lunch at a Jewish hotel that had a good choice of entrées, salads, and desserts... it reminded me of Piccadilly Cafeteria. We then went to the Benedictine Monastery of Mary's Dormition. In the crypt church there is a marble slab with a statue of Mary lying in a state of sleep. This marks the spot where Mary, the mother of Jesus fell into a deep sleep and then was assumed into Heaven in the presence of the apostles. After a few minutes of silent prayer in this church, we walked a short distance to the Upper Room—the place where the Last Supper took place, and where the Holy Spirit descended upon Mary, the Apostles & perhaps other people at Pentecost. The Upper Room was completely destroyed through history, but the walls and roof have been rebuilt over the floor. Our final stop of the day on the official tour was the Church of St. Peter Gallicantu. This church is built over the ancient location of Caiaphus' house. Here is the place where Peter sat in a courtyard and denied knowing Jesus three times. The church has several floors and staircases that will bring you down to a cistern