



THE TANTUR ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE

Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year!

Dan Koski, Tantur Staff



What an end to the year for us! After rumors of a cold, wet winter had been tempered by a warm, dry autumn, who could have guessed that Storm Alexa would not only arrive, but be the heaviest snowstorm since the Ottoman Era. All across the Holy Land a state of emergency was declared as snow piled up in unprecedented amounts. We weathered it quite well; a few moments without power, some felled trees and a few leaky spots in our roof, but otherwise it was a manageable, even enjoyable experience, with the unique sight of fresh-fallen snow in our courtyard and olive groves. Fortunately, the last of our Three-Month Sabbatical participants had left the country a few days before, as did those

of our international staff who had reason to venture home for the holidays, and, as in the case of our outgoing rector and family, to arrive back home to the United States for the next leg of their own journey. Now, as the extended Christmas season of the Holy Land is upon us and another year begins, we are grateful for the friends we have made and the time we had with them. From all of us at Tantur, we wish you a **Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year**, celebrating the birth of Christ in the town of Bethlehem, just a brief walk beyond our tower, and forever part of the heart, soul, and work of this special place.

Tantur at a Glance:

Focolare Ecumenical Conference for Bishops



On November 21st, Tantur was pleased to host the 32nd Ecumenical Meeting of Bishops of the Focolare Movement in our auditorium. This year's theme was "The Reciprocity of Love among the Disciples of Christ."



Starting with the Our Father prayer sung in Western Aramaic by attending Syriac and Coptic clergy, the conference hall was packed with representatives of multiple faiths and denominations who shared their experiences and current initiatives towards Christian unity in their respective countries. We wish the congregants all the best in their work, and hope to see them return to Tantur.

Memories of Tantur

Sr. Susan Sheehan DC

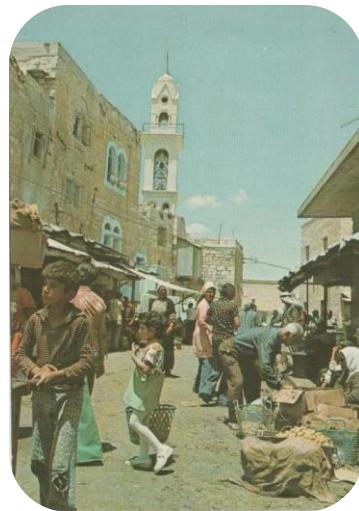
The Tantur Ecumenical Center was established a few years before I arrived in Bethlehem in 1976. The Rectors and their families have had a positive and valuable impact in Bethlehem and beyond. They still have today.

I had come to care for the babies and preschoolers in the Creche of the Holy Family Hospital. These little children were mostly from Muslim dysfunctional families and they needed nurturing and cuddling. Dorothy Nichol and her husband Donald were the first family I met from Tantur. She was an experienced and inspired nursery school teacher and he was the Rector of the Ecumenical Center.

Dorothy would gather the wives of the scholars and they would volunteer at the Creche. They would cuddle, play and stimulate the toddlers with educational, creative and meaningful experiences. She became a treasured friend and taught me many worthwhile things during her visits.

Donald was a wise, holy and humorous author and scholar. We relished his books and lectures. He was particularly interested in and informed about the saints and the desert fathers who lived celibate and heroic

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"The Rectors and their families have had a positive and valuable impact in Bethlehem and beyond. They still have today."

Bethlehem circa 1976, in the Green Market near the Syrian Orthodox Church. Photo courtesy palestinremembered.com



Our chapel, prepared for a Thanksgiving Vespers Service on November 28th.

Thanksgiving at Tantur

Tantur has always been a meeting place of faiths, denominations, nationalities and culture. This past November, the American tradition of Thanksgiving was alive and well as our staff, residents, Three-Month Sabbatical program participants and neighbors with the Middle East Studies Program joined us for an afternoon of prayer, fellowship, hospitality and thanksgiving. Our kitchen staff prepared a tremendous banquet for all who came, somehow managing to produce a complete traditional Thanksgiving menu, down to cranberry sauce and home-baked pies. It was a special moment for many as we gathered together in community. Thanks to all who came, as well as those who kept our American expatriates in thought and prayer back home.



Saying Goodbye: A farewell message from Fr. Timothy Lowe and House Matron Lisa Lowe

Rev. Timothy Lowe and his wife, Presbyter Lisa Lowe, were the Rector and House Matron of Tantur from the late spring of 2010 until the late autumn of 2013. The first Orthodox Christians to serve in these positions, they oversaw a period of transition that was marked by both challenge and renewal. Here Fr. Timothy reflects on his time with us.

Lisa and I have closed out our time here at Tantur, and we have returned to parish ministry. This transition also marks a new season in our lives as we reflect back on 38 years of marriage, children, grandchildren and now the extraordinary number of people who have become part of our lives while at Tantur. As all of you who have been to Jerusalem know, it is nothing if not the most manic place in the world. It is such a city of extremes; beauty and ugliness, praying people and cursing people, holiness and evil. God is invoked and worshipped in one breath while corruption and injustice is carried out in another. I have always been of the opinion that if you stay long enough in Jerusalem, you may have the foundations of your faith shaken mightily if you dare to open your soul to these extremes. That being said, I have found my own faith immensely renewed and remain hopeful; not because of the inhabitants of Jerusalem per se, but because of all of you. Sight unseen, you were willing to come to this place to share your lives and your ministries of faith with people you had never met, and were willing to engage, listen, and learn from each other; forming permanent friendships from the temporary communities that are the heart of this oasis called Tantur.

Tantur has been and will continue to be a dance of faith, a marriage of vision and hope in a complicated and messy corner of God's creation. People are messy. Ecumenism is messy. Our various churches have complicated histories and memories. Nothing is ever completed and achieved once and for all as the next generation has to step up and further the work of those who have gone before. While this can lead to immense frustration for those of us prone to empire-building, perfectionism and monuments of immortality, it can be quite liberating on the other hand to humbly submit to the passing of time and relinquish one's life and blood to the next generation.

Tantur is in a stage of transition but not instability. Strategic planning has begun to map the future. More energy than ever during my tenure is pouring in from outside and this includes more

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Saying Goodbye: A farewell message from the Lowes.

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scholars and the participation of more universities and other educational institutions in addition to the set of programs we run ourselves. Despite the regional instability of Egypt, Syria and others, Israel and Palestine remain quite calm and dare I say normal in comparison. Tantur will forever be defined by its location and this inevitably is part of its work and life. May its ecumenical spirit stay strong. May its practice of Middle Eastern hospitality never cease. And finally, may it have staff and leaders who remain flexible enough to meet the daily challenges of a very complex corner of God's creation.

Much love to all of you in the risen Christ as we depart.

Fr. Timothy and Lisa Lowe

Editor's note: the staff, academic faculty and extended Tantur community of the Holy Land thank the Lowes for a wonderful three and a half years of service, friendship and fellowship, and all the best in the new chapter of their lives.

Memories of Tantur

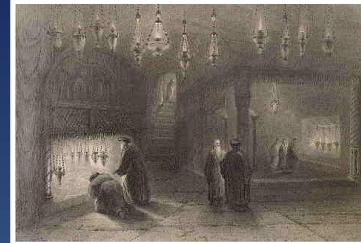
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lives. After one of his lectures, Dorothy stood up and asked him how ordinary people can become holy. Donald replied, "Just being married forces one to be holy as one is challenged by one's spouse." The audience erupted in laughter.

Other Rectors followed Donald and each had special gifts to enrich Tantur through difficult times. The two intifadas brought hardships on this Center located on the hill between the West Bank and Israel. The settlement of Har Homa was expanding at this time and many men without work permits braved cutting through the property to get to work. Fr. Tom Stranksy kept Tantur functioning through the first intifada. Fr. Michael McGarry was the Rector during the second intifada and I have great admiration for his leadership. He had to persuade soldiers who would enter the property to peacefully leave. He and Sister Bridget offered many enriching programs for well-known scholars. They also offered the opportunity and the environment for authors to write. The numerous courses offered throughout the years enriched many. The locals also benefitted from the workshops and symposiums. We were encouraged to be open to the challenges of living deeply in our faith in a multicultural society.

Sister Susan is presently with Saint Vincent of Ein Karem. For more information, visit svaka.org.

That We Might See Stars



Peter Mullins was an English Anglican participant in our three month course which has just finished. He wrote this poem at Sukkot.

You shall take the fruit of majestic trees [citron], branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees [myrtle], and willows of the brook... you shall live in booths... so that your generation may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. Leviticus 23.40-43

Begin with richness in the mouth
like date-palm fruit, let sweetness speak,
let each truth, each re-telling, make

guest-ready all our shelters, each
blest with fare citrus-sharp, with air
zest-laden, word and deed made one.

If flavour's source is lost, still let
goodness be pressed, like myrtle crushed,
to anoint, to scent even those

who wander willow's watercourse,
wild waste without wisdom's whetting,
wilderness without what work wafts.



Nativity Church in Bethlehem: Breakthrough in Restoration Efforts

The city of Bethlehem received an early Christmas present this year, when it was announced that after generations of fruitless, often tense negotiations between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the Franciscan Custos and the Armenian Church of the Holy Land, that restorations efforts of the roof of the Church of the Nativity would move forward. For the last few months, pilgrims have entered the basilica to find an Italian restoration team working on much-needed repairs to the centuries-old roof, which has been leaking badly,

which has caused water damage to the remaining mosaic panels and the walls.

While tensions often run high during the Christmas season between the three denominations represented at the Church, the mutually agreed-upon and funded restoration project for roof repairs has been seen as a promising sign of improved relations between the different communities, and hope for spiritual, as well as physical, renewal, of the place that marks the birth of Christ incarnate.



The interior of the Church of the Nativity. The roof, currently being repaired, last had structural maintenance over 600 years ago.

Tantur is an institute for ecumenical and theological studies, situated on a beautiful hill in Jerusalem near Bethlehem. It serves as a welcoming place in The Holy Land for visitors who come from all over the world seeking an oasis of learning, community, and hospitality.

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From all of us at Tantur, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!



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