

# THE TANTUR ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE

## A New View – For Now

*Dan Koski, Tantur Staff*



Late in the month of October, we received the call that we had been waiting for: the Jerusalem municipality was going to begin their highway expansion project on the western side of our property. Being the communications and marketing director at Tantur comes with the added responsibility of documenting a good amount of concerns with our facility, so it meant that part of a pleasant sunny morning was spent with a colleague taking photos of what remains of the stone wall that runs along the expanse of our western slope. For those of you who have been to (or driven past) Tantur since the winter of 2012-2013, you will know that a sizeable section of the wall collapsed after a winter storm. Now the rest of this section has come down as the highway is set to expand.

For good or ill, walls are part and parcel of the Holy Land. People have been building them for almost as long as people have been here. Every culture, every civilization, has left walls as part of its historical imprint on the Holy Land.

Regardless of the reasons why walls are built, these walls often are meant to define something as much as they are to protect it. Perhaps it is more accurate to note that in the Holy Land, the very act of definition is often a measure taken to protect something. So it is with Tantur's wall, built to define our property and to protect it therein. Yet as neighbors of Bethlehem, we are also painfully aware of how walls can be a part of a process of separation of peoples. Perhaps this is one reason why Tantur has also tried so hard to keep physical as well as spiritual and philosophical points of access open for all to come to, and through, us.

The wall of Tantur is being rebuilt following the completion of construction, and with it, a bit more quiet and sense of definition will return to our hill. Yet we do often wonder whether the day will come in our lifetime when no walls are needed at all.

## Tantur at a Glance

2015 Three Month Sabbatical



After our August break that fortuitously coincided with the end of a relentless heat wave, Tantur's 3-Month Sabbatical began on September 9<sup>th</sup>. 18 participants from three denominations, seven nationalities and four religious communities make up our 2015 program, which is set to run through early December. This will mean that our participants will be able to attend a forthcoming conference on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the document that reshaped Catholic-Jewish relations that Tantur is co-organizing in Jerusalem. While closer to the end than the beginning, there's still much more to come in this most engaging of sabbaticals!



Top photo: our 2015 3-Month Sabbatical Program Participants. Lower photo: A sabbatical participant (right) enjoys a cooking program at a refugee camp center in Bethlehem.

## The Lure of “The Holy Land”

### Prof. Paul Jones

After multiple trips to Israel/Palestine, you would think I’d get it. Yet, I am ashamed to admit that sometimes I feel like my student, who after a mere three days in the Galilee exclaimed in exasperation, “I’ve seen enough rocks already!”

Is “the Holy Land” only about the rocks?

After numerous visits to the traditional “sacred places” and the prominent archaeological sites, I know that the lure of the land is not the rocks. I was profoundly reminded of this “eternal truth” at Shabbat observance one Friday evening at the Western Wall. Deep in conversation with some American students who were spending a “gap year” in Israel studying Judaism, I turned to the one person who had not spoken. Looking him straight in the eyes, I asked, “Why are you here tonight?” His reply shocked me: “It’s not about the rocks; it’s about the people who come to the rocks.” Wow. He got it!

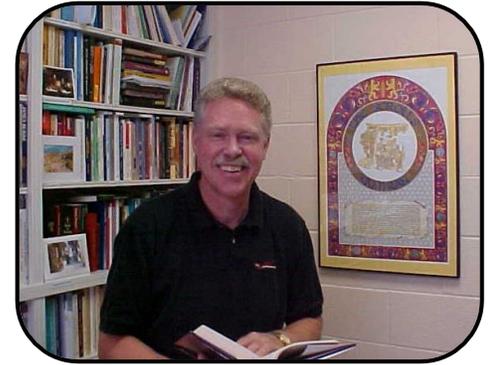
Jerusalem is “holy” to the three Abrahamic religions for obvious reasons. For Jews, the Temple Mount marks the location of the First and Second Temples, and thus the “Holy of Holies.” For Christians, Jesus the Christ was crucified and resurrected just outside the city, now commemorated by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. For Muslims, in spite of the significance of Mecca and Medina, Jerusalem

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## New Poetry Book by Dr. Saliba Sarsar

### *PORTRAITS: Poems of the Holy Land* is Tantor Scholar’s Third Collection

Dr. Saliba Sarsar, Professor of Political Science at Monmouth University in the United States and author of several articles and books related to the Middle East, is no stranger to complexity. Born to a Russian father and a Greek Palestinian mother who were both raised by a Palestinian Christian woman in the city of Jerusalem, Dr. Saliba’s identity is as richly interwoven with varying elements as the city of his birth and childhood. With family members still in Jerusalem (some of whom are within walking distance of Tantor), Dr. Saliba continues to return to the city for both professional and personal purposes, using Tantor as his residence and place of study. When not engaged in academic pursuits or with family, much of his time is spent writing poetry. Now adding to two previous collections of poetry is his most recent work, *PORTRAITS: Poems of the Holy Land*, which includes a poem dedicated to Tantor. (The poem will be printed in the next edition of the newsletter.) We look forward to Dr. Saliba’s next visit to Tantor, and hope he will be further inspired to write more work! *PORTRAITS* is published by Ilora Press in Cambridge, MA and is available from Grolier Poetry Book Shop, 6 Plympton Street, Cambridge, MA 02116, Tel. 617-547-4648, [grolierpoetry@verizon.net](mailto:grolierpoetry@verizon.net).



*“It’s not about the rocks; it’s about the people who come to the rocks.”*

Prof. Paul Jones has been a frequent guest and tour leader at Tantor for many years.



Dr. Saliba Sarsar has resided at Tantor on four occasions, most recently in the summer of 2011. *Portraits* is his third collection of poetry, following *Crosswinds* and *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*.



## A Place That Makes God Smile

Msgr. Dennis L. Mikulanic, S.T.D.

**I had the privilege of making my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land** in 1977 when I was a deacon at the North American College, the American Seminary in Rome. Beyond my wildest dreams I got to journey to the most sacred place on earth and there walk in the footsteps of the Master renewing my faith with every step. At the time I thought I'd probably never be able to return to the Holy Land because it was so far away from San Diego, California on the far western edge of the United States. Once I became pastor of a parish, though, I wanted to share that incredible experience with others so, over time, I led five parish pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Each time not only did the pilgrims return home with a renewal of their faith and a deeper appreciation for the Scriptures, but I found myself drawing deeper and deeper into the mystery of the Incarnation. Little did I realize that I would one day have the opportunity to spend a lengthy, prayerful time in the Holy Land. Eventually, after thirty six years of priestly ministry, my bishop granted my request for a ten week sabbatical at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute a few kilometers south of Jerusalem and overlooking the City of Bethlehem. Friends and colleagues of mine had been to Tantur but despite their descriptions nothing adequately prepared me for those wonderful days and weeks I spent there.

I arrived at Tantur late in the evening September 4, 2013 and was met at the front door by Tony Pohlen, Program Director of Tantur, who got me settled in my room and then ushered me and two other late arrivals into the dining room. Despite the fact that the kitchen was closed we were greeted, wined and dined as family by the kitchen staff. This was to be the beginning of a wonderful sabbatical.

Our particular sabbatical group was relatively small – only 14 of us – and we were an international and truly ecumenical group. We all enjoyed each other's company (I think) and learned much about each other's personal stories, homeland, culture and faith tradition. By and large our classes were informative and interesting giving insights into the Holy Land and its people that had previously eluded us. We received some excellent scripture study as well as history, geography, architecture, archaeology, cultural, political and religious lectures that expanded our horizons and helped us come to a clearer understanding of that ancient place. Our "field trips" were more like pilgrimages introducing us to sites that gave substance to obscure names and places we had read about for years in the Bible. Imagine the thrill of standing in the actual places where the judges, prophets and kings of Israel lived, not to mention seeing ruins of cities that are thousands of years old! "From Dan to Beersheba" finally made sense! Of course, for Christians no experience could match praying at the birth site of Jesus in Bethlehem or the awe-inspiring and humbling encounter at Calvary and the empty tomb.

The greatest advantage of a sabbatical program at Tantur, however, is getting to know the people who live in the Holy Land. We participated in Jewish a Shabbat Service and ate Shabbat Supper at congregants homes, visited The Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa mosque on Temple Mount, met and ate with Druze, Circassian and Muslim people. We were also introduced to Christians of different churches and communions and had the opportunity to worship with them. I was personally blessed to have as a friend Bishop William Shomali of the Latin Patriarchate who made sure to invite me to accompany him on parish visits, religious festivals and events at the Patriarchate for the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, of which I am a member.

Sadly, though, it's an undeniable fact that those who live in the Holy Land live in a pressure cooker society. One member of our group described it as "two peoples living side by side for whom the other doesn't exist." That might

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## The Lure of The Holy Land

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seem harsh but overall I think it's a fairly accurate assessment. Some memories of places we visited (like Hebron) are seared into my memory and will never be erased. Both sides have points to make. Both sides have grievances. Both sides need to come together in trust and good will to settle the differences that divide them. Both sides need to trust God.

Talking with the residents, the every-day people who simply try to make a living, it is evident that they seek peace and need political leaders to help them find it. While we were at the Sea of Galilee a young woman came up to me and welcomed me (obviously not native to the area) and asked why we were there. I told her that we were on a visit to get to know the land and its people and to increase our desire for interreligious and ecumenical dialogue and get to know one another better. She looked baffled and asked: "Why would you want to do that?" I was a bit taken aback but replied: "What we don't know we fear. What we fear we fight. When we fight, we have no peace." I guess this sums up the reason and the need for Tantur.

Tantur is a special place. It is a holy place. It is a place of God's work. Tantur is a place that makes God smile and nod His approval.

*Msgr. Dennis L. Mikulanis, S.T.D. is Pastor and an Ecumenical & Interreligious Officer of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego.*

## A Place That Makes God Smile

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is called al-Quds, "the Holy," because of Muhammad's Night Journey.

What does it mean then to apply the term "holy" to these places? At minimum, it means that these sites identify the poignant and pregnant intersection of life's different dimensions—the profane and the sacred, the mundane and the mysterious, the everyday and the transcendent. Because G-d comes to us in particular places at particular times, the "eyes of faith" can discern more than rocks. They glimpse the multi-layers—the depth dimension—of these locations. They affirm the "interior truths" revealed in sacred geography. They perceive and claim the spiritual taproots that continue to nurture and sustain the distinct religious identities that call these sites "holy." The "eyes of faith" can even imagine the people who journeyed to these locales long ago.

Most important, the lure of the "Holy Land" is actualized when our Abrahamic ancestors become our travel companions for today and tomorrow. Amen.

*Paul Jones is Professor of Religion at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky.*

## Staff Shot

### Welcoming Mark Mina



2015 has been a busy year of staff changes at Tantur. While we have been sad to see many familiar team member leave us for other parts of the world, we are delighted to see new ones arrive as well. One such new arrival is Mark Mina, our newly appointed Director of Operations.

Mark is a native of Jerusalem, and with personal connections to the Coptic, Catholic and Greek Orthodox communities of Jerusalem, he is certainly an ecumenically-minded individual who puts our message into practice!

Mark joins us after several years' experience in the nonprofit field, bringing a wide range of experience and a diverse skill set to our team.

As Director of Operations, he is responsible for day-to-day management of Tantur along with managerial oversight of our facilities and service staff. Our staff and residents have been impressed with his professionalism, pleasant demeanor and enthusiasm for the mission of Tantur. Mark is married with three children, and is active in several Jerusalem-area Christian societies and institutions.

*Welcome Mark!*



## CALVIN SHENK: AUGUST 7, 1936 - SEPTEMBER 18, 2015

Calvin Shenk, former Mennonite missionary in Jerusalem and Tantur resident, was a longtime advocate for Jewish-Christian relations in the Holy Land.

It was with great sadness that Tantur Ecumenical Institute learned of the passing of a good friend - Calvin Shenk, PhD - this past September.

Calvin Earl Shenk was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1936. A Mennonite by confession and educator by profession, he studied and taught at various Mennonite universities across the United States, also serving as an educator in Ethiopia for 14 years.

Calvin's involvement with Tantur was most poignant during the 1990s and early 2000s, when he and his wife Marie would reside at Tantur

for six months at a time while serving on the Mennonite Board of Missions (now the Mennonite Mission Network). Calvin was instrumental in strengthening institutional relationships with Tantur and Eastern Mennonite University, where he was on faculty from 1976 to 2002. He is well remembered by past and present Tantur staff, who recall his years of living at Tantur and his bringing numerous groups to the Holy Land. Calvin is preceded in death by his wife, Marie, and is survived by family, colleagues and many friends from across the world.



Calvin Earl Shenk, Ph.D. Calvin and his wife Marie were well-known figures at Tantur and in the Christian community of Jerusalem during the 1990s and 2000s.

*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.*

### TANTUR ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE

PO Box 11381  
9111301 Jerusalem, Israel



Tantur's former general contact email [tantur@netvision.net.il](mailto:tantur@netvision.net.il) has closed. Email is no longer being received at that address. Please use [tantur@tantur.org](mailto:tantur@tantur.org) or a specific staff member's email address for all correspondence.

International Phone: +972 2 542 29 00  
International Fax: +972 2 676 09 14  
General Inquiries: [tantur@tantur.org](mailto:tantur@tantur.org)  
Program Inquiries: [jvonwald@tantur.org](mailto:jvonwald@tantur.org)  
Newsletter and Media Inquiries: [dkoski@tantur.org](mailto:dkoski@tantur.org)  
[www.tantur.org](http://www.tantur.org)



*Tantur thanks Dorothy Jean Weaver for her assistance in compiling information on the passing of Calvin Shenk, Ph.D.*

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