

# Tantur Ecumenical Institute

## Newsletter

From Tel Aviv (Israel) to Tbilisi (Georgia)

by

Robert Benjamin Horne

### Latest News and Events:

- **From Tel Aviv (Israel) to Tbilisi (Georgia)** by Robert Benjamin Horne (Middle East Study Program Student). Graduated from Crown College. Saint Bonifacius, Minnesota, USA.
- **The Wonder of the Palm Sunday Procession in Jerusalem** by Sr. Mary Gomolka from Watchung, New Jersey, USA
- **5 Days in the Galilee** by Joyce Palevitz, New York, USA
- **A Reflection for May** by Fr. Peter Head SM, from Wellington, New Zealand.



The many different architectural styles that are found in Tbilisi, Georgia

The “Abanotubani” is the legendary sulfuric bathhouse district in the Old Town of Tbilisi, Georgia’s capital of not quite 1.5 million. Most of the complex spans back to 17<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman rule, though the springs themselves are enshrined in national myth from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Brick rooftops peek over the ground in a honeycomb-like network, just off the banks of the lazy Kura River, which slices through the densely layered fusion of mediaeval cathedrals and old houses from Imperial Russia. The decaying fortresses, typifying past and present symbols of autonomous power, crest distant foothills of the Caucas Mountains. These mixed surroundings evoke a richly conjoined vision of the *hammam* baths from “Arabian Nights” peopled by chivalrous citizens of old Europe. Today, the region’s bathhouses preserve vestigial customs as a routinely frequented center for information and leisure. As a semi-integral social institution comparable to our gyms and pubs, the communities’ entire rank of curmudgeons, arm-chair philosophers, businesspersons, and athletes gather to share the news. In years past, these bathhouses have been visited by both French novelist Alexandre Dumas and Russian poet Pushkin; the latter describing the bath as the best he’d ever had. As my hygiene was suffering after a smoky, sleepless night rail from Yerevan (Armenia), I was eager for a nine Lari (just over 5 USD) indulgence of historic amenities. George must have arrived precisely when he meant to as my ignorance of Russian and Georgian proved debilitating, so his communicative assistance with the receptionist was as appreciated as the company we would share that afternoon.

George was a middle-aged American who closely resembled actor and screen-writer William Macy in both demeanor and appearance. He had lived in Georgia for the past decade or so with his Russian wife and two teenage daughters. When we met, he was presiding as chief researcher over a democratic educational firm in the Caucasus, though he was considering a transfer to a similar position near Moscow. As we progressed through the painful scrubblings, saunas, and baths it became obvious that my company was as valued to him as his intriguing experiences were to me. This struck me as odd. As his experiences in international academia and his “lectures” of both espionage conspiracies and regional mores didn’t show much promise of coming to a conclusion any time soon, he offered to treat me to sushi while waiting for his family. Much the penny-pinching tramp, I yielded eagerly. However, had I known the *actual* price of this evening of dining and advice, I would have hesitated before consenting. So began my Georgian adventure with Tbilisi as its interesting and diverse capital city. The architecture of the city is an eclectic mix of Georgian, Byzantine and neo-classical Russian/European interspersed with Middle Eastern influences. The oldest and most beautiful parts of town are Abanot-Ubani, Avlabari and parts of the Soloaki districts which exhibit all these architectural styles. A classic case of East meets West and well worth a visit!

*Robert is a student who participated in the Middle East Study Program and travelled onwards on completion of his course. Israel & Jordan provide an amazing base to discover the amazingly diverse countries of the Middle East, Caucasus, Ukraine and beyond with flights from Tel-Aviv & Amman.*

Tantur Easter Group 2012 about to take part in the Palm Sunday Procession



The Palm Sunday procession in Jerusalem attracts people from all over the world of all different faiths, cultures, young and old. Shoshanna & Izzy Lowe Clark about to embark on their first Palm Sunday parade



## The Wonder of the Palm Sunday Procession in Jerusalem

by

Sr. Mary Gomolka

“As they drew near Jerusalem, entering Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent off two disciples, with the instructions: ‘Go into the village straight ahead of you and you will immediately find an ass tethered and her colt with her. Untie them and lead them back to me. If anyone says a word to you say ‘The Master needs them. Then he will let them go at once.’ (Matt 21:1-3). Using Matthew’s account of that Sunday, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, greeted by cheering crowds, pilgrims who were in Jerusalem for the annual Passover feast and bearing palm branches, we reflect on that past event. We also look at its celebration today, as it is carried out by the faith-filled. The ride of Jesus from Bethphage to Jerusalem was about 2,000 cubits, or a half mile. Prior to that day Jesus had been traveling through villages, preaching and healing. Now he would return to Jerusalem as the *Messiah* (from Hebrew, meaning “the anointed one”) On April 1, this entry was retraced in procession by thousands, with on-lookers lining the path as it wound its way down and up cobblestoned streets. Starting out from the Franciscan church in Bethphage, there was a white donkey in the lead. There were hundreds of scouts, evident in their uniform, as were drum and bag pipe bands. Many carried palm branches, signifying victory, while banners and signs displayed by those processing revealed the church or parish which they represented. Shoulder to shoulder walked the faithful from all parts of the world including the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Singing continually accompanied the journey, sounds overlapping from group to group.

The mixture of languages, songs, flags, instruments and native dress, all gave the afternoon a festive air, a parade appropriate for the joyful event being remembered. At the end of the procession, with seminarians and priests in their black robes preceding the Latin Patriarch, a simple entrance was made into the courtyard of Saint Anne’s Basilica. Hundreds waited there where a short prayer service and a blessing in Arabic and English closed this memorable Palm Sunday which marks the start of Holy Week. The Orthodox Palm Sunday would follow one week later. Why has this procession drawn such an outpouring of devotion, one asks? Could it be that it tugs at the heart strings of our own fickle nature. Whether a highly qualified theologian, or one of simple faith, there is enough spiritual matter here to chew on. We may often profess loyalty and greet Jesus when all goes well, but is there consistency in giving praise when expectations are not met? (Further Scripture references: Mark 11:12, Luke 19:29, and John 12:12)

## 5 Days in the Galilee

by  
Joyce Palevitz

Early one morning, as we walked on the Mount of the Beatitudes, I reflected on how much quieter I found it that day versus when I had been there two years before when it seemed like the place was overrun with busloads of pilgrims. I said as much to our guide, Ghada, who replied, "Perhaps it's you who are different." Well, true. Traveling in the Galilee area in spring of 2010, with a group of about 24 on a Holy Land pilgrimage, I had discovered the truth in the saying that sometimes you are "running where Jesus walked." Off the bus, back on the bus...just try to find enough quiet to "experience" the stories of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it was on that earlier trip that I first experienced the land as "the fifth gospel" and found in the ancient site of Capernaum a deep connection to Jesus and a desire to return. So I was particularly happy to experience Galilee at a more leisurely pace with our Tantur group as part of our 6-week study program.

By the time we arrived at the sites around the Sea of Galilee, we had already experienced the heights of Mt. Carmel and Megiddo. We had not only looked down on the Jezreel Valley, we had traveled its length. We had seen the head waters of Senir, of Dan and of Banias - the springs that join together in the Golan Heights and become the Jordan River. We had stood where we could look across a valley and see Lebanon on the other side; and at another valley to see Israel's border with Syria. We had driven through lush, green-carpeted hillsides and plentiful valleys, rich with almond trees, olive trees and all kinds of vegetation. It is an extraordinarily beautiful landscape.

But what I came to appreciate most of all about Galilee was its quieter pleasures. To go down to the water's edge in Tiberias - at sunset the water traffic is quiet as the boats return home - their daily labors of ferrying people across the lake completed. To walk the back streets of Nazareth (even to see carpenter shops!) and be greeted with warm, welcoming smiles by storekeepers. To visit a Druze village in the shadow of Mt. Hermon and have a simple lunch of flatbread. To spend time in the Church of the Annunciation just taking in a beautiful stained glass window.

There were many wonderful moments for me during our stay in Galilee, but the one that I think I will always remember was during a communion service that we celebrated almost at the water's edge near the Church of St. Peter's Primacy. The rain was falling softly and as the service was drawing to a close, someone started singing "Ubi caritas et amor..." "Where charity and love is, God is there." These were voices raised in harmony, quietly confirming that which draws us closer to each other and to God.

In the Holy Land, and especially in Galilee, you never know where or when the quiet moment will happen - where God will find a way to speak. Ghada told us a wonderful saying attributed to St. John of Dalyatha and it reflects so well my experience of Galilee: "Hush your tongue that your heart may speak and hush your heart that God may speak."

Springs at the Source of the Jordan River which replenishes and breathes life in to the Sea of Galilee



Dusk, by the Sea of Galilee.



*A Reflection for May by Fr. Peter Head, SM*

As I write this reflection I am looking at a photo I took of a Palestinian shepherd, with his sheep and goats following him, as they graze along the side of a road. The Gospel of today is John 10:11-18 "The Good Shepherd". The Gospel and photo bring back vivid memories for me of my recent time in Israel and my six-week course at Tantur. The experience brought me in touch with people and places with a history that is very complex. I have come away from this experience with my views, opinions on various aspects of this unique land, its people and what I experienced over six weeks. But there is a sense in which I can never understand the complexities of a country and its people having only lived there for six weeks. As someone stated: "after a week I was going to write a book; after six weeks I was going to write an article; after three months I went home confused and wrote nothing". Timothy Radcliffe, in one of his books, mentions life is about "discovering our shared humanity". My prayer and my hope for all the peoples of this land is that there will be a time when all will "have life and have it to the full".

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