

**COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE SISTERS OF THE HOLY CROSS
AND THE BROTHERS AND PRIESTS OF HOLY CROSS
AT MATER ECCLESIAE CENTER, TIBERIAS, ISRAEL**

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by

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INTRODUCTION

I am most grateful to the Sisters of the Holy Cross from St. Mary's, Notre Dame, Indiana for allowing the brothers and priests of Holy Cross to share with them this apostolate which has been so important to the Church and to the communities of women religious from Asian and African countries and to do so in the land of Jesus. Further, I am most grateful for them in encouraging me to give this presentation here. I feel quite humbled to do this because many of the Holy Cross Sisters have lived and worked at M.E.C. far longer and harder than we brothers and priests have. They have worked amidst many difficulties and graciously and generously carried out their apostolate under very challenging physical situations as well as under various tension raising experiences between the Israeli Government and the Palestinians/Arabs and also between the Sisters and the Israeli Government. I am in great admiration for what they have done for the five hundred seventy participants, mainly sisters, from African and Asian countries, who have come into greater contact with the land of Jesus and deepened their lives in the love of Jesus and their fellow humans. Many missionaries from European and North American countries have also shared in the life lived at Mater Ecclesiae Center, Tiberias, Israel.

A FEW NOTES ABOUT ISRAEL, TIBERIAS AND MATER ECCLESIAE CENTER

ISRAEL

Israel is a small Middle Eastern country. It encompasses 7,992 square miles or 20,782 square kilometers. It is over 1,000 square miles smaller than this State of New Hampshire which contains 9,304 square miles. Many Israels could be fitted into Quebec or into Ontario. The so called West Bank is less than 3,000 square miles, about one-third the size of Israel. Israel considers the West Bank/Palestine as a prize of war. It still treats it as such. On the north Israel is bounded by Lebanon; in the northeast by Syria; on the east by the country of Jordan and on the south by Egypt. The Mediterranean Sea forms its western coastline.

Israel received its independence in May of 1948, granted by the United Nations and at the same time granted the Palestinians their own country with Jordan as the administrative leader. Palestine today is better known as the West Bank. In the 1967 war, Israel defeated the Arab Nations trying to defeat Israel. As a consequence, Israel took over all of the U.N. mandated territory of Palestine and it was then called the West Bank. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War Israel again defeated the Arab countries attacking it. Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Today 97% of the West Bank is still under the control of Israel.

Israel has a population of a little more than 5½ million people, 4½ million being Jews, 81%. The Muslim population is 805,000, 14.4%. The Christian population is 160,000 or 2.9%. There are 95,000 Druze, 1.7%. About 85% of the Jewish population are cultural Jews, rarely going to the synagogue. The remaining 15% are Orthodox, Hasidic, Jews and are very faithful in their religious practices. The Orthodox Jews exercise considerable power in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. Israel is a parliamentary republic and has no written Constitution.

All of the Palestinian/Arab minority and the Druze speak Arabic, their first language. Most of the Palestinian/Arab minority are Muslims. There are three main Christian branches or communities: Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox and the Latin or Roman Catholic. Of the 160,000 Christians, 123,000 are Catholic. Of these 60,000 are of the Roman Catholic or Latin rite. Most of the other 123,000 are Greek Catholic also called Melkites or Byzantine rite. A very small number of other Catholics belong to the Syrian, Armenian, Coptic and Maronite rite Catholic Churches.

Hebrew, Arabic, and English are compulsory subjects in the schools in Israel regardless of whether the schools are for Jewish or Palestinian students. Almost all Jews know English and many of the Palestinians, except for some of the older men and women, also know English. It has been my experience that both the Jews and the Palestinians are quite friendly and helpful, especially the Palestinians. Jewish people tend to be more reserved unless they know you. The tourist trade being so important for both groups no one wants to harm visitors.

More than 90% of all exported goods are industrial products, including polished diamonds, machinery and transportation equipment, plastics, processed foods, textiles, fashion clothing and chemicals. A considerable income derives from pilgrims and tourists visiting Israel. Each year the United States subsidizes Israel to the tune of 3.4 billion dollars not including considerable technical grants for military research and development. The American-Jewish community provides over one billion dollars in aid annually to Israel.

TIBERIAS

Tiberias is a modern city lying on the western shore of the Lake of Galilee. It has a population of about 30,000 to 35,000. It is a resort and recreational center for Israelis and also for Palestinians. Tiberias is about 95 miles by road north of Jerusalem and also about 95 road miles from the Ben Gurion International Airport which itself is about 8 to 9 miles east and a bit south of Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv is on the shoreline of the Mediterranean Sea. Tiberias is ideally located for Christians wishing to visit the Holy Places in Galilee such as the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes;

Peter's Primacy Church, both being at Tabgha; Nazareth; Cana; the Mount of the Beatitudes; Capernaum, Bethsaida; and Kursi. Kursi is the place where Jesus drove out the demons from a possessed man or two men, and into the swine that rushed into the Lake of Galilee. There are a number of good hotels in Tiberias including several fine, inexpensive hotels for Christian visitors. The present city of Tiberias is a bit north of the old city of Tiberias founded about 14-18 A.D. by Herod Antipas. The Talmud was completed here. Many famous rabbis lived and worked here and are buried here.

MATER ECCLESIAE CENTER

Mater Ecclesiae Center is only a 7-10 minute walk north of the downtown part of Tiberias. It is situated on a hillside and the property is about 2 acres in size and its lower end is less than 100 yards from the Lake of Galilee. The main building at the top of the steep hillside is the oldest building outside the old walled city and was built in 1912. The property is owned by an Italian Lay Mission Organization. Italian Franciscan Sisters originally used it for a school for both Jewish and Palestinian girls. After Israel's independence in 1948, the Palestinian girls were forced to leave the town with their families. The Jewish girls wished to enroll in their own Jewish schools. For a time M.E.C. served as a hostel for United Nations people. This was not a successful venture so in 1974 the Franciscans were delighted to welcome the Sisters of the Holy Cross who took over the direction of the building and property. The lower part of the property is an orchard for various fruit trees: oranges, grapefruits, lemons, tangerines, olives, mangoes, avocados, pomegranate, pumalos. In the spring time from Feb. to April many wild flowers make their appearance. Tiberias, at least where M.E.C. is located is extremely hot and humid from May into November.

The main building at M.E.C. is constructed of carved blocks of basalt, a very heavy dense, blackish rock, hardened lava extruded from volcanic activity not uncommon in the area. M.E.C. lies along the Jordan Valley, a northern extension of the great rift valley of Africa extending from Tanzania to Syria in the north. The Holy Cross Sisters have put extensions and additions on the original building including a dining room, a three story addition on the south end of the main building which includes private rooms on the first two floors and a community series of rooms on the third or top floor. Other improvements include a car or van port and roofing over the laundry room, ironing room.

THE HISTORY OF THE SISTERS OF THE HOLY CROSS AT M.E.C. AND COLLABORATION WITH THE BROTHERS AND PRIESTS OF HOLY CROSS

In 1973 Sister M. Olivette Whalen concluded her term as Superior General of the Congregation. At the same time Sisters M. Gerald Hartney and M. Carmen Davy ended their terms as General Treasurer and Mission Coordinator respectively. Sister Kathleen Anne Nelligan, the newly elected Superior General gave Sister Olivette the assignment to "reed, write and listen to the Spirit."

Sister Olivette's request to spend some time in the Holy Land was granted. Then she planned on moving to Uganda to help in the religious formation of Ugandan Sisters. Sister Carmen was assigned to the apostolate in Uganda. She accompanied Sr. Olivette to Rome, hoping to receive her visa and work permit from the Ugandan government. While the two were in Rome war broke out between Israel and the neighboring Arab States thus delaying Sr. Olivette's planned visit to the Holy Land. This war was the Yom Kippur war.

While in Rome Olivette and Carmen paid courtesy calls on various church officials there. Among them were Cardinal Agnello Rossi, formerly Archbishop of Sao Paulo, but recently appointed Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples; Fr. Charles Schlect, C.S.C. at the same office; Fr. Bernard Ransing, C.S.C. at the Sacred Congregation for Religious; and Sister Laura Therrien, C.S.C. of Canada, who was the Secretary of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) in Rome. All spoke of the urgent requests from African Sisters for assistance in formation work. A Nigerian priest also approached Olivette and Carmen asking on behalf of his bishop for the sisters to go to Nigeria to help form a new diocesan congregation.

By now Sr. Olivette decided that her time in the Holy Land should be spent planning a formation program that could serve as a basis for the future work in Africa. Sr. Gerald had arrived in Rome as well. Olivette and Carmen now approached Count Carlos Venerosi, Secretary General of the Association Ernesto Schiapperelli. It was the initial intention of this association to give help to Italian missionaries. It owned several houses on the Lake of Galilee near the Mount of Beatitudes. The sisters wanted to use a smaller house for a short time. The Count either did not understand their aims and desires or he himself had other wishes for them, insisting that they use one of the Association's houses more suitable for the program for African sisters. Reflecting on all the turns of events Olivette concluded that the Holy Spirit was taking over.

In spite of the continuing war between Israel and Syria, the three sisters flew to Israel in time for Christmas staying at the Franciscan Hospice, CASA NOVA, in the old city of Jerusalem. The next six months were spent consulting with Church leaders there, among them Archbishop Pio Laghi, who knew of the Sisters of the Holy Cross while he served in a previous post in Washington, D.C. The Archbishop strongly urged them to visit the house which the Italian association was offering. He also obtained a temporary residence for them at the Syrian Catholic Vice Patriarchate in Jerusalem, located on the grounds of Maison d'Abraham, a hospice for poor pilgrims in East Jerusalem and near Gethsemane.

The three pilgrims visited the house in Tiberias, the one offered them. Sr. Kathleen Anne sent the three sisters a cable assuring them of her support for the program. A few days later they received the General Council's permission to open the house in Tiberias on an experimental basis for five years and assigned Srs. Olivette, Carmen and Gerald to the ministry. The name Mater F. L. ...

first Holy Cross establishment in the Holy Land. It was also the first foundation of any U.S. religious in Israel.

The sisters spent the next five months preparing for the opening of the program in Tiberias. They visited the Holy Places: the Holy Sepulchre, Bethany, Jacob's well and other holy sites which would eventually form part of the curriculum for the formation center. They also made the acquaintance of other Church leaders in the area and engaged a secretary to send letters to the Bishops and Major Superiors of African Communities informing them of the Holy Cross plan; and creating the curriculum itself for formation program participants.

On May 21, 1974 with a Volkswagon truck and driver provided them by the superior of the Home for the Elderly in Jerusalem, the sisters moved some furnishings to the house in Tiberias. The three sisters made their final move from Jerusalem to the new Mater Ecclesiae Center on May 27, 1974 and they were warmly greeted by the elderly Franciscan Sisters who had been maintaining the building and had long hoped for a release from their responsibilities. The Franciscan Sisters welcomed the Holy Cross Sisters with "a lovely dinner".

Mater Ecclesiae Center was now in the hands of Holy Cross. The opening date for the first session of the program for spiritual renewal for African and Asian Sisters was set for June 30, 1974.

PROGRAMS AT MATER ECCLESIAE CENTER

There were two programs each calendar year: a longer 7-8 month program from Sept.-Oct. to April (to the week after Easter), and a shorter 9-10 week program from May to early July. This shorter program was for missionary sisters, brothers, priests of various religious communities or dioceses.

For each new term, the instructors helped the participants to become familiar with various facets of the Middle East reality, especially the religious climate differing greatly from what the participants had experienced before.

The focus of the program at Mater Ecclesiae Center has always been to come to know and to develop one's relationship with the Lord through a reflective study of Scripture. This is done in a variety of ways: classes taught by a rich array of Biblical scholars; visits to the sites described in Scripture (shorter and longer pilgrimages) and time for prayer.

The participants live in community, an essential feature of the Center program. The international and multicultural makeup of the Community brought its own stresses and joys. The lifestyle was simple with the staff and participants both sharing in the household tasks: cleaning, cooking, doing the dishes, preparing prayers and liturgies.

There were regularly scheduled Cultural Nights during which time the participants

had the opportunity to tell about their own countries, cultures, and religious congregations.

STAFF AND COLLABORATION

There has been at least thirty Sisters of the Holy Cross who have worked and lived at M.E.C. Sisters Olivette and Carmen and Gerald were the original staff leaders. Sister Olivette spent eleven years in a leadership position and Carmen almost eighteen years. Carmen took over the leadership from Olivette and became the Director around 1984 or 1985. Sister Elsbeth Mulvaney spent from 1991 to the present at M.E.C. taking over the Directorship from Sr. Carmen in 1992. Sisters who have spent three or more years living and working at M.E.C. include, besides those already mentioned, Juliette Schuckenbrock, Mary Margaret Koester, M. Rosine Hammett, Celine Dounies, Lillian Sullivan, June Ann Kirby and Yvonne Hatt. Sisters Elsbeth (Beth) and June Ann (Junie) continue to serve at M.E.C. Sr. Junie served at M.E.C. in 1975 and in 1989 as well as from Jan. 1992 to the present.

As most of us probably know M.E.C. closed for good this past April 2. A young, generous, dedicated Scottish woman, Maggie Mathieson has recently been cooking and helping Beth and Junie to carry on the "decommissioning process" along with Br. Taddeus (Tad) Las, CSC, a long time missionary in Uganda. The Sisters are planning on leaving M.E.C. and Israel for good by the beginning of this August.

Seven CSC Brothers have served at M.E.C. and shared in the life and activities at M.E.C. A number of CSC priests as well as other religious priests and diocesan priests have served and lived at M.E.C. for relatively shorter periods of time. Some of the non CSC priests include the "White Fathers" now called the Missionaries of Africa, the SMA or Mission Society of Africa, Mill Hill Fathers. Fr. Jock Dalrymple a Scottish diocesan priest was a very inspiring teacher at M.E.C.

Brother Eduardo Michalik, CSC, among the brothers, has served for the longest period. He has served for six years, from 1983 to 1989. Only due to his persistence and the prayers of the CSC Sisters did he manage to be assigned to M.E.C. He contributed in a number of ways at M.E.C. He was the maintenance director as well as the gardener, taking care of the fruit orchard of orange trees, lemons, grapefruits, pomelos, tangerines, figs, olives, mangoes, avocados. Besides ~~watering~~ watering the trees in the dry season which extends from May until the first rains usually in November, this requiring a great deal of energy even with irrigation, Eduardo trimmed these from time to time. Most of the trees grew on a steep hillside making the watering and trimming more difficult. Eduardo also took care of the flowering shrubs and herbaceous plants around the house. Eduardo, an excellent swimmer, was the swim instructor for those wishing to learn how to swim. Eduardo was also the photographer for the Communities

taking snaps of the participants and their activities, having the film developed and supplying copies of prints to those who wanted them. This alone was a very demanding activity. Like most of the other brothers and staff sisters he was a driver for the Communities and groups, driving to the Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv to meet the incoming participants and also returning them to the airport after their particular program ended. This was no mean task because most of the flights were scheduled to require the drivers and helpers to leave M.E.C. at night or very early morning between 10 P.M. and six A.M. Sometimes two trips had to be made to the airport during the late evening and early morning hours. Many of the roads on the 95 mile trip one way were/unlit, narrow, and bumpy.

Br. Robert Siegel served as cook at M.E.C. from 1985 to 1987. He also did the buying of the groceries. He was very generous with his time and very accommodating to changing times for meals. He put out some great banquet meals and did so with a very pleasant flourish.

Br. Donald Allen was invited to come and work at M.E.C. in 1984, arriving in the summer of 1985. His main task was to catalog and classify the 3,000 or so books as well as to teach the Geography of the Holy Land and the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. He assisted Eduardo with the maintenance and gardening work. He left in 1987, but returned in 1992 for another two years to continue his teaching. At this time he took over the gardening and maintenance work. He again returned in the summer of 1996 and left for good in late January of this year.

Br. Taddeus Las arrived in 1992 and continued Donald's library work and completed the cataloging and classification of the books. He also, with Eduardo, did the maintenance and gardening work continuing it after Eduardo left in 1989. After two years at M.E.C. Tad was joined by his fellow Easter Province Brothers companion, Brother Charles Varnik. Br. Charles had been the skipper of a Navy PT (Patrol Torpedo) boat in WW II in the South Pacific. Charlie also helped with the maintenance and gardening work.

While Tad and Charlie were working at M.E.C., the Gulf War broke out. The participants were transferred to Rome where the program continued. Br. Tad and some of the staff sisters accompanied the participants. A skeleton staff remained at M.E.C. to provide security for the buildings and property.

Br. Simon Murren joined Donald in January of 1993 and remained one full year, returning to the U.S. due to medical problems that had landed him in the Catholic Hospital in Nazareth, about 22 miles or 35 miles west of M.E.C. Simon did the maintenance work at M.E.C. at which he was very good. Sam found the walking up the steep hill back to M.E.C. after Mass at the Church of St. Peter's on the waterfront in Tiberias a very difficult challenge. The same proved true when he went up and

down the steep hillside at M.E.C. leading to the lower orchard. Despite all this he was a very hard worker.

Brother Robert Ludwig, another Midwest Province Brother, a long time missionary in Brazil arrived in Sept. 1994 to take over the maintenance and gardening work from Donald. He stayed on until July of 1996, Donald again taking over the duties from Robert.

The brothers shared in the community life at M.E.C. including the Eucharistic Liturgies, the morning and evening prayers etc. The very high summer temperatures extending from May until November and the high humidity due to the proximity of M.E.C. to the Lake of Galilee made the gardening work quite difficult. The average high temperatures during the summer at M.E.C. was 100°F. or 38°C. Sometimes the temperatures would go up to 110°F. or 43°C. There was no air conditioning except for a very small, old one in the living or community room on the 1st or ground floor. The staff sisters lived on the top or 3rd floor. The heat there as well as the rock and other contemporary music blasting from evening tour boats and near-by youth hotels and restaurants made sleeping very difficult. It would go on until midnight or often to 2 AM. The women participants lived on the 2nd floor or 1st floor in European terminology.

A number of Holy Cross priests have served at M.E.C., celebrating the Eucharist, teaching Scripture and other classes, helping with the 30 day retreats and doing spiritual direction, doing maintenance work and helping with household tasks such as food shopping.

Fathers Jim Doyle and Tom Feeley, Eastern Province priests taught and presided at the Eucharistic Liturgies. Fr. Gene Burke taught the Gospel of Mark and did electrical and plumbing work. Fr. Jose Martinelli taught liturgy classes. Fr. Dick Rucherford did the same. Fr. Bill Blum taught and assisted at the 30 Day Directed Retreats. He also gave spiritual direction. Fr. Tom McNally was another contributor. Fr. Maury Amen was the last CSC priest who taught and also did household work such as shopping and presiding at the Eucharistic Liturgies. Fr. Chester Soleta was also a staff member for a short time. Other CSC priests came for short visits. All in all there were quite a few CSC priests that came for shorter or longer periods to visit or to help the staff.

There were priests that came to teach and be part of the staff that came from other religious communities: Fr. Tom King, S.J. from Georgetown Univ., Fr. Gerry Heuthorst from the Netherlands, a Mill Hill Father; Fr. Paul Vonck, a White Father from Belgium, Fr. Jim Kerstner, SMA from Ireland etc. Fr. Jock Dalrymple, a Scottish Diocesan priest was an outstanding teacher of spirituality.

CONCLUSION

As already mentioned Mater Ecclesiae Center closed its doors for good on April 2 of this year. It has served the world Church for the past twenty-four years. It has had five hundred seventy persons who have come to a deeper relationship with the Lord and with one another. They have reached a greater understanding of the people of God, both ancient and modern, through experiences provided through Mater Ecclesiae Center. The participants have in their own countries become more effective ministers.

The number of persons who have been part of the life of Mater Ecclesiae Center is much greater than the five hundred seventy participants. Teachers, volunteers, sisters, brothers and priests on the staff for long or short periods of time, neighbors, visitors, United Nations people, the Thai people employed in local restaurants who found a welcome at Mater Ecclesiae Center — all have been touched.

There is pain in ending and closing down. The withdrawing, like the founding is done as an act of faith. We know that Mary, Mother of the Church, Mater Ecclesiae, will surely continue to intercede with her Son for whatever graces are needed by those who have been a part of this ministry.

The good which God has brought forth through the Sisters of the Holy Cross and their associates in the Holy Land will continue to nourish the Church in ways unknown to us.

Thank you.