




CHAPTER  
  
TWENTY-EIGHT

In June 2000, I landed at Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv, in the heart of modern Israel, and from there began my literal ascent to Jerusalem, a city uniquely holy to all three great monotheistic faiths. It is an ancient place, battled over furiously for almost two millennia, a place to which pilgrims of all descriptions have journeyed since time immemorial.

To get to Jerusalem from the airport, my taxi took Israeli Route 1, which runs from the west near Tel Aviv almost all the way to the Jordan River to the east. The route snakes its way up from the populous areas near Israel's coast, through an area of relative wilderness, directly to the walls of the ancient city. Along the way there are numerous villages, like Abu Ghosh, for example, traditionally inhabited by Arab Christians. In those sleepy-looking towns, church steeples rather than minarets foreshadow the Christian holy sites that lie beyond the Jaffa Gate, Old Jerusalem's only portal leading back to the sea. I was disturbed to see, lining Route 1, what looked like the carcasses of Israeli tanks left over from the War of Independence in 1948. (I later found out they were the burned-out remains of supply trucks used in that war, which had been armored to protect them from snipers as they made their way to the Holy City.) Whether they are too heavy to remove or, better, one hopes, left as a reminder of the tragedy of war, I did not know. But they certainly made a strong impression on me as I began my mission of peace in the Holy Land on behalf of the Pope.



## CREATION

When I arrived at the King David Hotel and was shown to my room, I opened the shutters and looked out over the Old City panorama spread out far beneath me. The most dominant landmark, besides the city's walls themselves, is the golden Dome of the Rock, the mosque built atop the ruins of the Temple of Solomon that is an unmistakably strong, almost dominant Muslim architectural presence. But the mosque is almost matched by the presence of numerous bell towers of the many churches that rise above the walls of the Old City, magnificent buildings such as the Roman Catholic Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion, which is said to be the place where Mary fell asleep for the last time, just before she was taken into Heaven. Or the ornate tower of the Cathedral of Saint James, headquarters of the Armenian Patriarchate. Christians are important here, these towers seem to say. Hidden from view that day but very much on my mind was the Wailing Wall, the Western Wall of the Second Temple, the place where we Jews believe we are closest to God. Religious Jewish Jerusalem, the most ancient of all three faith presences, is by far the most understated, despite the ongoing conflict that might indicate otherwise.

The following morning I walked through the Jaffa Gate into the Old City proper, turned left, and made my way up a narrow street to the headquarters of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. His Beatitude Michel Sabbah was the first Palestinian ever to hold that exalted title since it was established by the Crusaders in 1099. I was met at the entrance to the Latin Patriarchate by its Chancellor, Father Raed Awad Abu-Sahlyeh. Father Raed was young, in his midthirties, tousle-haired, fast-talking, and energetic. He welcomed me with open arms, literally embracing me as he said in heavily accented English, "Brother, welcome to our home."

I almost wanted to look around to see whether Father Raed had somehow mistaken me for someone else. But I guessed that Bishop Dziwiz had indeed prepared the way. I was clearly expected that morning.

Father Raed led me through the narrow hallway, past the entrance to their cathedral on the right, and ushered me into a small, simple,

but functional meeting room—a far cry from the Vatican and its ornately decorated Papal Palace. I waited for some minutes while Father Raed went off to see about the Patriarch. I was expected, he said, and would be brought into His Beatitude's presence quite soon. "His Beatitude—quite a title," I thought, and one I knew was reserved for the leaders of only four specially designated historic dioceses of the Catholic Church. As I waited impatiently, I began to imagine my coming encounter.

His Beatitude was said to be as much a proud Palestinian patriot as a leader of the Roman Church. I am Jewish—my name would tell him that—but I was sure Bishop Dziwisz would have made that clear as well. Would politics be a part of our meeting? Would he embrace our vision of brotherhood, or would he be skeptical about the entire project?

Finally Father Raed came back and led me across the hallway. As we entered the large reception room of the Patriarch, I noted its spare, understated style, muted Persian carpets on the floor, and the chairs lining the walls, Arab style. One large chair sat in the middle along the far wall, in which, I presumed, His Beatitude would take his rightful place. He entered from the hallway down which I had come, with Father Raed trailing just behind. He was short and round-faced, with a tight smile and stern bespectacled eyes. His long black cassock was adorned with a large silver pectoral cross. A red bishop's skullcap rested on his balding head.

His Beatitude came towards me, opened his hands, and offered me a firm handshake. He offered no *abbraccio*, but it was a warm welcome nonetheless. His Beatitude introduced me to His Excellency Kamal Hanna Bathish, the Vicar General of the Latin Patriarchate, the Patriarch's right-hand man, and invited me to sit in the chair alongside his. This was as high-level a reception as I could possibly have imagined.

Patriarch Sabbah began our discussion by saying he had heard about the concert for His Holiness' eightieth birthday. He told me that Bishop Dziwisz had indeed written to him about me after my last visit to the Apostolic Palace in May.

## CREATION

“Maestro,” His Beatitude said, “we will do everything to help you. We all think such concerts could be a strong sign for peace. The Holy Father’s visit here in March has shown us the way, yet again. What can I do to make your visit most effective?”

“Your Beatitude,” I answered, “I would wish to perform concerts in all three great places of pilgrimage: Bethlehem, Nazareth, and here in Jerusalem. We need to find just the right church in each place. I had thought of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, and I would be open to any suggestion you might have for the concert here in Jerusalem.”

“Yes, Maestro, yes. I see. Let us take this one step at a time. There are many problems. We live in a sea of problems. Each of these places has its difficulties. I think, yes, we can overcome them. But the proper people must be approached in the proper manner. I am not the final authority here. There is the Palestinian Authority in Bethlehem. They must approve any concert in Bethlehem. Then there is the Bishop of Nazareth. He must agree to your giving a concert in his church. And of course, the Israeli Government. I suppose they would need to be involved. And most of all, there is the Custodia Terrae Sanctae, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Places. Its head, the Custos, Father Giovanni Battistelli, must give his approval for any of the places you have mentioned. We are brothers in protecting and administering the ancient churches. I will help you to meet them, and I will support your project as strongly as I can, as I have said. I believe with all my heart in the way of peace. Father Raed will help you with everything. Maestro, I wish you Godspeed.”

And with that, he left. Father Raed, true to His Beatitude’s word, sat down to go over the details of my coming busy two days in the Holy Land.

“First, Maestro, you must go to Bethlehem to meet Christiane Dabdoud Nasser,” Father Raed said. “She works for the Palestinian Authority as the head of their Bethlehem 2000 Project. Ms. Nasser can begin to work with you to plan the concert in Bethlehem. I will call her right now, and see whether she is free even today. We need to start right away.”

THE POPE'S MAESTRO

He picked up the telephone that was on a small table in the Patriarch's reception room and called Christiane Nasser. He spoke a few words of Arabic into the phone, and got off in a hurry.

"She is excited. She too has heard about your project. She wants to see you right away. Can you go directly? She will wait for you at 11:30 A.M. in her office in Manger Square in Bethlehem."

"Yes, yes, of course. That is why I am here." I got to my feet, thinking it was now 10:30 A.M. Bethlehem is only a few kilometers from Jerusalem, but it was impossible to tell how the traffic would be, especially in and around Jerusalem. I rushed to the door and was about to leave when Father Raed stopped me.

"I almost forgot. There is someone else you must meet." I looked around to see that a youngish Arab man had entered the room. He was clearly a layman, as he wore no priestly garb. "This is Wadie Abunasser. He is Executive Director of the Committee for the Great Jubilee here in the Holy Land. Wadie, this is Maestro Gilbert Levine, the conductor who has performed so often for the Holy Father. He has been sent here from Rome to plan some wonderful concerts.

"Maestro, Wadie will pick you up tomorrow at your hotel and take you to Nazareth. You will meet with Bishop Marcuzzo there at 11:00 A.M. Now, do please go; there is no time to lose. Call me about anything you need. Anything. Please, I am here to help you."

"Yes, thank you so much. And please thank His Beatitude also."

I reached out to shake Mr. Abunasser's hand, and told him I would look forward to seeing him at the hotel the next day. As I was about to leave, I remembered and turned to face him. "What time?" I called out. "What time do we have to leave?"

"8 A.M. I will pick you up at 8," Wadie shouted out to the back of my head, as I rushed into the narrow street that led to the square just inside the Jaffa Gate. I quickly searched for a taxi with a white Palestinian license plate to take me to Bethlehem.

Once before, on my voyage of discovery with my friends Jacques Barrot, a major French political figure, and his wife, Florence, at Easter in 1990, I had had a chance to encounter Palestinians in a way few Israelis ever can. I was present at meetings in the French diplomatic

## CREATION

mission to Jerusalem, where Palestinian officials and important members of Palestinian civil society had opened their hearts and voiced their concerns to Jacques, in his capacity as head of the French Christian Democratic Party. Back then, however, I was but a fly on the wall. My French was fine, so I understood everything that was said, but my role was simply to listen, to witness, and then perhaps to give Jacques my Jewish perspective on what had been discussed. Now, as I sped toward Bethlehem, I realized I would be at the center of an enterprise that would depend very much on Palestinian cooperation and initiative to succeed.

The Holy Land that I saw from the taxi on the way to the birthplace of Jesus was a land seemingly at peace. The Judean Hills stretched out beckoningly on my left, as the walls of Old Jerusalem faded in the rearview mirror. There had not been any fighting between Palestinians and Israelis in years. It seemed that everywhere I looked as we entered Bethlehem, there were construction cranes, which are the clear markers of major economic activity. Prosperity, it seemed, was finally beginning to touch the Palestinian street. My taxi driver, a thirtyish-looking man from Ramallah, told me that his dream was to save eighteen thousand dollars so that he could buy a condominium for his family in his hometown. He said he wished his kids could get an education so that they could have a better life than he had. These seemed like the dreams of taxi drivers everywhere, whether in New York, or Paris, or Tel Aviv.

I arrived at the offices of the Palestinian Authority in Bethlehem and was shown upstairs to meet Christiane Nasser, an elegantly dressed woman in her late thirties, I surmised, whose English was ever so slightly accented, but not by her native Arabic. To my ear, at least, I detected a clear French influence. Ms. Nasser was exceedingly well briefed. Even before I said anything, it was clear that she knew why I had come. As a Catholic with close associations to the Patriarchate she had heard all about the Papal Concert at the Vatican. As the head of the Church Relations Unit of the Bethlehem 2000 Project, she wanted, she said, to do anything she could to bring such an event to her native town.

## THE POPE'S MAESTRO

She immediately introduced me to Dr. Nabeel Kassis, the Minister in the Palestinian Authority in charge of her department. Dr. Kassis also pledged to do all he could to bring our event to Bethlehem.

Christiane offered to give me a small tour of Bethlehem, and we walked out of her office, turned left into Manger Square, and came almost immediately to the Church of the Nativity, where I thought our concert should take place. We entered the church, which was smaller than I thought it would be. But I felt its beauty and its powerful tradition, nonetheless. Its double rows of columns were stained towards the top with centuries of dark discoloration. It did not appear that this ancient sanctuary would give us the space we needed for our "Creation" performance. It would have to be carefully assayed, of course, but since even now, at midday, the church was overcrowded with tourists, any such assessment would have to await a quieter visit.

From there Christiane led me to the Church of Saint Catherine, right next door, a lovely church whose modern Gothic revival architecture did not give it quite the same atmosphere as the Church of the Nativity we had just left. We looked around and did some quick calculations about the space that might be made for musicians and choristers around the altar in St. Catherine's, then made our way outside.

Once back in Manger Square, Ms. Nasser invited me for a coffee, and introduced me to the complexities of Christian Bethlehem. Christiane told me that the Church of the Nativity was controlled by the Orthodox Church. We would never be able to get permission for a concert there. But perhaps, if we were fortunate, St. Catherine's, a Roman Catholic church, would be a possibility. She asked whether I had met with the Custos. I told her that Patriarch Sabbah had mentioned Father Battistelli but that I had not yet had the pleasure.

"Well, you see, Maestro, it's like this. His Beatitude is the highest Church official in the Roman Catholic hierarchy here. He is the head of all the Catholics in the Holy Land. But the Custos, he is charged by the Holy Father with maintaining and protecting all the holy sites, including the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. Did the Patriarch explain that to you?"

CREATION

“No,” I said, “our conversation was not so detailed. He had indicated it would be important for me to meet him, but he did not say precisely why.”

“You will find out soon enough. But please be assured that we, here at the Palestinian Authority, will do all we can to help you with your ‘Creation’ concert. It would be such an honor for us to be able to include this in our plans for the Great Jubilee.”

I asked Christiane about modern-day Bethlehem, about all the construction cranes I had seen on my way into the city.

“We are in a very good period right now. We are building hotels, a new convention center. We look forward to even more tourists,” she said, with a laugh. “We are very optimistic. Your concert, with an international orchestra and choir, here in our Manger Square, would fit in so wonderfully with the future we hope we are building.”

“Well, I hope so, too. I have come this far to see that we succeed. Just a quick question: Do I hear a French inflection in your English?” I asked diffidently.

“Yes,” she smiled. “I am really bilingual, I guess trilingual—if you think my English is OK—as is my whole family. But we are very fond of French culture. I really hope my children can study at the Sorbonne.”

I thanked her for the coffee, and for the beginning of what I hoped would be a very fruitful friendship, then found a taxi so that I could return to Jerusalem.

When I returned to the King David Hotel, there was a message from Father Raed.

“Maestro, how did it go in Bethlehem with Ms. Nasser?” Father Raed asked when I called him back. “The Patriarch wants to know.”

“Fine. I believe we have a good beginning. When do you think I can meet the Custos? His Beatitude had told me that would be important, and now Ms. Nasser told me the same.”

“Well, Maestro, not this time, I’m afraid. The Custos, he is very busy just now. When will you come back? Soon, I hope. You will meet him then, I am sure. In any case, tomorrow you will go to Nazareth to meet Bishop Marcuzzo and to see the basilica. Wadie will pick you up



at your hotel. Please call me before you leave for Rome tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yes, I will," I said, not remembering when I had told Father Raed about my travel plans. All I could think of was that the village that is the Vatican extends its borders all the way to the Holy Land.

Later that afternoon, I met with both the British and the American Consuls General in Jerusalem. I saw the American, Gerald Feierstein, who served as the American representative to the Palestinians, in his West Jerusalem office. Jerry confirmed my impression that peace and prosperity seemed to be breaking out all over. He said my concerts would come at just the right time. His British counterpart, Robin Kealy, agreed. He was especially interested in our plans because a major British orchestra was to perform these concerts with me.

The next day, as promised, Wadie Abunasser picked me up at 8:00 A.M. in the lobby of the King David. Wadie is an Israeli Arab, educated in Israeli universities and fluent in English and (I presumed) Hebrew as well as his native Arabic. As one of the principal coordinators for John Paul's visit to the Holy Land that March, he was as well positioned as could be to assist us in making our pilgrimage concerts a reality.

But Wadie is first and foremost a Palestinian. He wanted to introduce me to the West Bank, to see it through his eyes. So he chose a route from Jerusalem to Nazareth that went by way of Jericho, all the way to the east, and north along the Jordan River, instead of the route most Israelis would have taken, namely, doubling back into Israel and driving up the center of the country.

I was fascinated. Everything I saw was new: Arab villages. Some Israeli settlements. Again, the great Judean Hills. As we drove, Wadie poured out his heart.

"We Catholics believe in nonviolence. We are for peace. The Patriarch, he is talking all the time about Palestinian rights, yes, but only achieved through peace. The Christian presence in the Holy Land is so important for this. We want to see a peaceful solution to all the problems here. And we are under such pressure. Our villages are emp-

CREATION

tying out. Whole communities are emigrating. Even to America. You will find more Palestinian Catholics abroad now than here. This is terrible, not just for us. But for everybody. I hope the Pope's trip here last March will convince people to stay. I am so glad he has sent you to us. Maybe these concerts can show our people that the outside world cares about us more than for just a few days."

As we approached the city of Jericho, I saw nothing of the biblical wall, or of the Prophet Joshua himself, but I did see a new, fancy-looking casino. It was an Israeli casino, Wadie told me, which was generating business for Jericho and the whole of the West Bank. He was not a fan of gambling, he assured me. But the Oasis Casino, as it was called, approved by none other than Yasser Arafat himself, was a promising sign of Palestinian economic development. Wadie wished it were a shopping mall, but he hoped it promised prosperity nonetheless.

We turned back towards Israel, crossing the heartland of the West Bank, finally arriving at the residence of the Bishop of Nazareth, His Excellency Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo. Bishop Marcuzzo was born in Italy but had spent many years in service to the Latin Patriarchate. He showed me his basilica, which like the Church of the Nativity was his for religious worship, but which was overseen by the Franciscan Custodian of the Holy Places, Father Battistelli, whom I would not be able to meet on this trip.

Bishop Marcuzzo shared with me some of his many troubles in Nazareth—troubles with Catholic emigration, and with a growing Muslim presence in what had been a majority Christian city. There was now a movement to build a large mosque directly across from the basilica, one that would perhaps be even larger than the great church itself. Things were changing in Nazareth, His Excellency told me. And he was not sure the times ahead would be easy. We agreed to stay in touch, but I had the feeling I was leaving behind a man in the middle.

My whirlwind visit was now drawing to a close. I phoned Father Raed one last time before I boarded my flight to Rome.

"Everything went well," I said. "Everyone from the Patriarch, to Christiane Nasser, to Wadie and Bishop Marcuzzo, have been as

## THE POPE'S MAESTRO

helpful as they could be. I will report to Bishop Dziwisz that we are on our way.”

The day after I arrived in Rome, I went to the Apostolic Palace to meet with Bishop Dziwisz and tell him all that had happened in the past week. He was amazed, both at the rapidity with which I had managed to see so many of the important personages in the Latin Patriarchate, and with the seeming progress I had made toward realizing our treasured Holy Land concerts. He counseled patience with the Custos.

“Yes, Maestro, Father Battistelli is very busy. But I am sure the next time you go he will find the time to see you. Do let me know when that might be. I will tell him again how very important these concerts could be in continuing the Holy Father’s search for peace.”

I flew back to New York feeling a sense of accomplishment almost too good to be true. The scene on the West Bank was so peaceful. The prosperity that was blossoming was all too promising. Everyone was talking of peace. Would it remain so? We would all have to wait and see. But outwardly, at least, there was not a cloud in the Middle Eastern sky in July 2000.