

Reflections from the HILLTOP (TANTUR) - Jerusalem/Bethlehem
Giovanni Scudiero IMC, Vice-President, Pax Christi

“Embracing” the enemy... wearing an “explosives belt!”

Contextual theology from the safety of the HILLTOP

Context: “Bombings, more bombings, more occupation by IDF forces, injuries, killings, destruction of more houses, anger, frustration, despair, suicide... Palestinian cities and villages are under siege in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. If the Israeli military is not actually in the town, the military is encircling the town with soldiers, armaments and military vehicles. Many villages are invaded, houses demolished and Palestinian people traumatised, injured and killed. People are existing under difficult circumstances: there is a 70% unemployment rate in the West Bank and Gaza. At least 65% of the people are living under the poverty line -- \$2.00 per day or less, according to the World Bank. Israeli checkpoints are everywhere and Palestinian people are prevented from keeping medical appointments, seeing family, going to work and school and going to pray. “

I've heard it said, spend two days in the Middle East, and you can write a book, spend two months, and you can write an article; but spend two years, and you will write only a paragraph.

I have been here a little over a month, but I already feel it is hard to write even a sentence... So, what I'll do, instead, is to lift a few entries from my journal.

Tuesday, 9 Sept 2003



Checkpoint at Tantur , October 2003

My first full day in Tantur (it means “hilltop”) between Jerusalem and Bethlehem... A beautiful location on top of hill overlooking Bethlehem. If I stretch my arm I can almost touch it... It is so real and also so different from what I expected. Late at night, I reach the large terrace on top of the building. Comfortably warm temperature. Nearly full moon tonight, and Bethlehem looks even closer. All so peaceful in its soothing brilliance. I use my binoculars to explore the activity at the check-point, just 200 meters from my observation point. Nothing much happening... It's past 11:00 PM - time for bed. Brushing my teeth - while thanking God for the wonderful first day in the Holy Land. Suddenly, the floor under my feet jolts and a very loud, muffled-like thump startles me... An eerie silence follows. I rush to the nearby terrace, where the silence is soon shattered by a river of wailing ambulance sirens and strange horn-blowing police and army vehicles... a Palestinian suicide bomber has just blown himself up in a very crowded café in the German quarter of Jerusalem, not too far from here. So far, 5 dead and 15 injured... Welcome to Jerusalem, the city of “peace”... Should I look forward to tomorrow?

Wednesday, 10 September

Only a couple of the Palestinian staff at Tantur make it to work - I am not sure how, since the check-point is sealed. Another day of frustration for the local residents whose life is at the mercy of events beyond their control. The only other staff working today are the few who had decided to stay overnight at the Institute. I understand that some of them often spend a whole week at the Institute rather than face the daily uncertainty of the check-point...

Monday, 15 September

12:00 AM - Our lectures over for the day, I grab my camera (well Greg's camera, a wonderful “pen” with which to record my impressions!) and proceed to the check-point via the passage cracked open by an Israeli army bulldozer in April 2002, at the time of the siege of Bethlehem. What looked then like an act of wanton destruction of “Vatican property” turns out to be a real blessing for hundreds of Palestinians who daily attempt to circumvent the check-point by “crossing over” through Tantur's premises... Today, however, soldiers have (illegally! - this is considered “extra-territorial” Vatican property, i.e. it's like being in the Vatican) themselves entered the grounds and are chasing after people running in all directions: men trying to get to work, women with little children hoping to make it to the hospital... At the check-point, dozens of men, women and children, sitting in small clusters, under the blazing sun (it is well over 35 degrees!) waiting for what?... A young man approaches me, bored perhaps or simply adventurous enough to test his actually quite good English, and asks me whether I come from America (of all places!). I am quite pleased to announce that, no, I am from Italy... No mention of England at this point. In the

course of the conversation it emerges that what these people are "waiting for" is to be given back their ID cards taken from them sometimes as many as three hours earlier in the hope that they be let through the check-point. I do not see anybody allowed through today...

"Check-point": the most common word in today's Palestinian vocabulary...

Saturday, 4 October

"*Ramallah*" - After a long detour to avoid as many check-points as possible, I come to "the mother of all check-points": "*Qalandya*" - a seething mass of humanity - angry, frustrated and mostly despairing, drowned in a malodorous cloud of dust pinned down by a cacophonous and health-threatening 150-decibel fury of horn-blowing, ancient battered cars and overloaded lorries screeching to a halt, people shouting at the top of their voice... non-stop! I stand in the middle of all this for over an hour, waiting for my contact to show up. I forgot my hat and have no water - at some point, I thought I was going to collapse...



Welcome to Ramallah - October 2003

Ramallah is "the capital of Palestine," the seat of Palestinian Authority, a place from which an Israeli disempowered Arafat is supposed to wave a magical wand and... "disappear" along with all the Israeli problems. I have come to attend a meeting for teachers from seven schools that have been piloting a project called "Living in the Holy Land: two peoples, three religions," initiated by the Arab Educational Institute in Bethlehem with the support of Pax Christi among others. I have been invited by the Director of the Institute to represent Pax Christi. Except, the Director himself could not make it through the check-point (I have now created an "auto text" entry for this word to save typing it so often...): another wasted day for him!

The meeting takes place in a Restaurant. Delicious Palestinian food shared by 22 people in a very relaxed atmosphere. The proceedings are in Arabic (except for my short presentation which is translated). This gives me a

chance to observe closely the body language. Lots of good humour and laughter. Until the "news": a suicide bomber, a young woman, has just blown herself up along with 19 other people enjoying a meal in good humour and laughter in another restaurant in Haifa, just like us... Stunned silence all around me. Noisy Ramallah at a standstill... Then, someone comments: "another nail into our hopes. But life must go on!" They all nod in agreement and resume their animated conversation as if nothing had happened. And yet, I feel deep tension and anxiety in all of them. After about 20 minutes, the meeting comes to a premature end, to ensure that everyone can get home before another curfew is declared.

I take a taxi to the check-point, that is by now very quiet, although a mile-long car queue is stuck. I am told that nobody will be allowed through, even though I see many Israeli plates among the cars. Maybe tomorrow... I walk across the check-point (my Sean Connery looks and especially my Italian passport always do the trick...) - at the other side Samir, our driver from the Institute is anxiously waiting for me. Few words exchanged during the journey. I will not forget this day.

Sunday, 12 October: Another typical day in Palestine

- Conclusion of the 1st phase of Israeli Army's operation in Rafah refugee camp in Gaza.
- Goal: to destroy tunnels allegedly used by Palestinians to carry weapons "under" the Sinai border with Egypt.
- Outcome:
 - Tunnels found = 3
 - Weapons found = none
 - Houses destroyed = over 100
 - People homeless = over 1500
 - People killed = 8 (2 children among them)
 - People wounded = over 85

Operations to continue throughout the "joyous" Jewish festival of Succoth (Booths), a reminder of a time when the Jews were themselves homeless wanderers through the desert... The "sanitized" area - according to UN observers - now looks like the landscape of a major earthquake: roads uprooted, total destruction of gas, telephone and electricity infrastructure ... no water!

Monday 13 October

More of the same. Except the dead and wounded today are different people!...

Much anger in the air. For some unexplained and obviously arbitrary reason, the check-point to Bethlehem is again sealed off for Palestinians. It opens only to coaches carrying Jews to Rachel's Tomb (1/2 km from here - Palestinian side). Out of 22 workers at Tantur, again only 2 make it through using the "hole" made by an Israeli bulldozer into the Institute's perimeter wall during the siege of Bethlehem.

6:40 AM - Awaken by shouting of abuse by Israeli soldiers through booming loudspeakers... It's going to be one of "those" days...

11:00 AM - "rescued" by our House Matron (blonde, blue-eyed and with Danish passport!) 2 more workers make it through, after being held at gunpoint for 3 hrs (sic!) by the perimeter wall of Tantur along with over 50 other people also prevented from going to work. A thirsty soldier searches his backpack for a coke to drink. An old lady, out of sheer anger and frustration, mutters in Arabic: "May it be a poison to you!" Another woman adds: "If I had a belt (of explosives, that is...), I would embrace you", thus adding new meaning to the commandment "embrace your enemy..."

11:30 AM - F16 fighters still roaring overhead - frightening noise, if you envision what they are about to do somewhere in "occupied territories," or Syria/Lebanon. We can hardly hear the voice of our lecturer. Today's subject is "contextual theology". What a context! It seems all so idiotic and unnecessary: if you want to provide protection to the Jewish pilgrims to Rachel's Tomb in Palestinian territory, how do you achieve that by antagonising Palestinians and preventing them from getting on with their already miserable life? But then, whoever suggested that there is any reason or rhyme in the way a 20-year old soldier holding a twitchy finger on the trigger of a machine gun decides who comes and who goes?...

Tuesday, 14 October



Baby-Hope, Caritas Children's hospital, Bethlehem, October 2003

Check-point stories:

1. People trying to cross check-point - ID cards withdrawn by soldiers - held for 2-3 hours while people are made to "sit down" under the blazing sun - no water - waiting in hope to be let through. 3 hours have passed - ID cards returned to owners - permission to cross denied!
2. Group of women, one of them with a poorly looking baby slumped across her arms, presenting to soldier on duty "special permit papers," properly issued by Israeli authorities to let them through. Soldier grabs papers and without a word or a look, tears them up and throws them to the ground. Women stare at each other, and the one with the baby bursts into tears... permission to cross again denied! Will the baby make it until tomorrow when they will try again?...



Giovanni going through the Tantur 'hole in the wall', October 2003

Giovanni

Tantur Ecumenical Institute
17/10/2003