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Institute of the Black World



The Institute of the Black World 21st Century (IBW) was resurrected by Dr. Ron Daniels and group of long time friends and allies in 2002 as an outgrowth of the historic State of the Black World Conference convened in Atlanta in 2001.

Monday, 30 April 20



Black Catholics Visit the Holy Land

Written by Herb Boyd
Thursday, 26 April 2007



Five sisters of the faith, pose with Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. Photo by Herb Boyd

By Herb Boyd
Managing Editor, TBWT

Jerusalem – After a recent weeklong tour of Israel, Rev. Father Levelt Germain said his reading of the Scriptures will never be the same. “I have an entirely new appreciation of them, having walked in the place where our Lord walked.”

Who's Online

We have 6 guests online and 1 member online



Pilgrims outside the Garden of Gethsemane

Father Germain, of the Church of the Holy Rosary in the Bronx, was among eleven Black Catholics invited to the Holy Land by the America-Israel Friendship League (AIFL) and the Jewish Community Relations Council. None of them had been to Israel before and the tour from the Sea of Galilee to the borders of Bethlehem was as exhausting as it was fulfilling.

“I think we gained a deeper understanding of the struggle the people here face and the significance of our Christian heritage,” said Sister Loretta Theresa Richards, a member of the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary in Harlem. “It was a chance to see how people live on the other side of the world.”

Whether walking in the footsteps of Jesus, conducting mass in a number of splendid churches, or listening to several notable political and religious leaders, the group was daily amazed and uplifted by the experience. “One of the most humbling experience for me was being baptized in the Jordan River,” said Avitus Kigutu, a priest from the suburbs of Chicago. “And I will never forget our walk along the Via Dolorosa where Jesus walked on his way to Calvary.”

Along with their visitations to such holy places as the birthplace of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, the group heard lectures from various rabbis, including David Rosen, president of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, and Michael Melchior, chairman of the Education, Culture & Sport

Committee of the Knesset. Both addressed a common theme of national security for the state of Israel and its acceptance by the Palestinian Authority.

"The vast majority of people in Israel favor a two-state solution," said Rosen, "and it is in our interest to find a solution, both politically and morally."

Rabbi Melchior said Israel should give up all the territory seized after the war in 1967, "but only if the attacks against Israel cease." He was disturbed that there were those enemies of Israel who say it should be destroyed.

Some evidence of the ongoing conflict in Israel could be seen in pockmarked buildings and the erection of walls dividing Jews from Palestinians, though the group sped through parts of the West Bank without really getting a chance to meet with the residents there. "It was a most enjoyable and informative pilgrimage and we accomplished quite a lot," said Anita Baird, director of the Office for Racial Justice of the Archdiocese of Chicago, "but I was a bit disappointed that we didn't get a chance to go to Bethlehem where Christ was born and to meet with the Palestinians there."

The group, however, did hear from Maher Turjman, regional director of the Pontifical Mission of Jerusalem who spoke proudly of their achievements in housing and education in Bethlehem. His message was given even greater resonance by Michel Sabbath, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem in his call for peace. "We need peace from the Palestinians and from Israel, and when they become friends with the Palestinians, all others will become friends," he said, referring to the majority of Arabs in the Middle East who surround the nation of six million Jews.

There were also planned and incidental meetings with Black Hebrews and Ethiopians, which gave the visitors some indication of the nation's ethnic diversity. Rabbi Sharon Shalom, a Black Hebrew with Ethiopian roots, provided them with at least a glimpse at the complexity of race in Israel, and his remarks complemented what they had heard from Ethiopian students at Ono Academic College, several of whom admitted that racism existed but felt it was more rewarding to focus on their careers than to waste time protesting.

One of the most unforgettable moments on the trip occurred toward the end when the group was taken to the Yad Vashem, a monument created to commemorate the holocaust in which six million Jews were systematically exterminated by the Nazis. "It was absolutely overwhelming," said Sister Donna M. Banfield, principal of Holy Names of Jesus and Mary Catholic School in Memphis, Tenn. "The images I saw there will live with me forever."



A view of Jerusalem

From the very beginning of the mission, which the tour's coordinator Brother Tyrone Davis had defined as a pilgrimage, the intention was to give a few prominent Black Catholics an opportunity to come to Israel and to experience the Holy Land, and to gather some notion of the differences separating the people. "I think we accomplished that and several other things," he said. "It was an extremely rewarding trip and I think I speak for the others when I say that our hosts were most gracious and accommodating."

The other members Davis, who is executive director of the Archdiocese of New York's Office of the Black Ministry, was speaking for includes Joseph Powell, Jr., president of Mojo System Inc.; Father Freddy Washington, of Chicago; Sister Dorothy Hall, pastoral associate at St. Augustine Church in the Bronx; John Baynes, formerly the director of the Office of Black Ministry in the Bronx and Brooklyn; and Sister Paul Theresa Hennessee, S.A. of New York City.

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