

Father Ty's reflection: An indelible impression on mind, heart and soul

The priests in the group continue to share some of their reflections on the pilgrimage. Here's a different perspective from Father Ty Hullinger. - CG



A memorial monument outside the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Israel. (Catholic Review photo | Christopher Gunty)

“For me, one special pilgrimage encounter was our visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust (Shoah) History Museum in Jerusalem. I had heard many people talk of its importance and the impact it can have on the one who visits it: from our own Cardinal William H. Keeler to the many rabbis and cantors I have known. I must say that the experience touched me deeply, and has left an indelible impression in my mind and heart (and, dare I say, soul?). I have visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., numerous times, and it is a powerful place of memory, but Yad Vashem had further layers and depths of meaning for me. One of the first exhibits was on the Church's influence in inflaming the powers of hate, anti-Semitism, and anti-Judaism by a preaching of contempt for the Jewish People, especially during the Middle Ages. Yad Vashem did not shy away from presenting the disturbing images coming from within the Church of depictions in art, architecture, etc. of the Jewish people as rejected or accursed. And this was easy fuel for Nazis to ignite into flames of contempt, hatred and destruction. I appreciated the fact that Yad Vashem did not chose to ignore this tragic history, but presented it upfront, as one of the first exhibit panels, forcing us to move beyond our complacencies.

And as we journeyed to the Hall of Names, where Yad Vashem has collected more than 3.5 million (of the estimated 6 million) names of Jewish men, women and children who perished in the crimes of the Shoah, I was confronted with the knowledge that of the names already collected at Yad Vashem, there were Hullingers and Hollingers, mostly from Southern Ukraine and Romania, who perished in the death camps. Are these distant relatives? Why does my family have

no knowledge of them? The general assumption among the elders of my family is that we are descendants of German and Swiss Protestants. But is there more to my own family tree? Is there another history of my family that has been forgotten (deliberately or not)? The Hall of Names is a circular room, painted black, that is in reality a library of names and memories. About half of the shelves are already filled with huge black books containing the names and information of 3.5 million Jewish victims who are known. The other half is empty. It reminds you that there are still so many lives hidden among the horrors of what happened, waiting to be discovered by relatives and friends. Many may never be remembered because there were no immediate survivors among family and friends. That is a haunting thought. As if the designer knew these emotions would surface, the Hall's ceiling is a cylinder of portraits of victims, faces that swirl upward to the light. But the middle of the floor is the reverse image of the ceiling. It is a dark abyss, literally a pit that extends down into darkness below. How much has been lost by the cruelty of human persons? This "empty tomb" immediately reminded me of the empty tomb of Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. So much remains unknown, and unknowable to us.



Father Ty Hullinger prays at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, one of the most sacred sites in Judaism, and also welcomes those of other faiths. (Catholic Review photo | Christopher Gunty)

This pilgrimage leaves me with new questions to consider. Maybe that is why we make pilgrimages to holy places. Our presumptions and assumptions about our faith will be challenged on a pilgrimage. Dreams and ideas confront reality, geography, and even family history. Pilgrimages pose difficult issues and questions that the pilgrim must wrestle with. So like Jacob who wrestled with God (or his angel) in the night, I too now am confronting the difficult but necessary and life-fulfilling questions God is posing to me.

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