

Father Ya'aqov Willebrands

Autobiographical Sketch

Lavra Netofa/Israel

2002

## YOUTH

After two miscarriages, my parents went to an old sanctuary of our Lady at Heiloo to pray for a healthy child. A year later I was born in Haarlem on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1918. The music of a barrel organ sounded just before our door and this seemed the right moment for me to come out of the womb. My mother told me later that I was washed with 'war' soap (it was the time of the First World War 1914-1918).

At the age of four my parents moved to Delft, where my father became a teacher at a technical school. We belonged to a new parish on the skirt of the town and I was keen on all what belonged to religion. My father was one of the first to have a radio. It took up a whole table and sometimes we invited our neighbours to listen. I felt very proud when they heard through our radio about the reception of the Cardinal Delegate to the International Eucharistic Congress in Amsterdam. This happened in 1924 and I was 6 years old.

My father had a cousin with whom he was very close from his early youth. His name was Laetus Himmelreich. They visited one another during vacations. The cousin lived in Alkmaar and my father in Haarlem. He had a German father and a Dutch mother, the sister of my grandfather. The young Laetus became a Franciscan, Dr. in philosophy. From 1921-1931 he was the secretary of the Minister General of the Franciscans in Rome. Every year during the summer he came for some days to our house. We called him always 'uncle' and the reception was great. I enjoyed it immensely. He made on me, an 8 years old boy, a deep impression. As he himself was driven, he tried to communicate with me that 'Israel was the eldest brother in the family of God. We should give him the right place. God had still something very special in store for the people of Israel. Perhaps we would even see this in our days'. He had Zionist sympathies but it came forth from a deep religious insight

On Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 1919 father Laetus baptised in the church of the convent of St. Anne in Munich Sophie van Leer, later on called Francisca van Leer. On that moment began Himmelreich's 'love for Israel', as he called it himself. This love would procure him in the coming years great problems within the Catholic Church and within his Order and made him also finally arrive in the concentration camp Dachau.

Sophie van Leer was of Dutch origin, raised in a traditional Jewish family as the seventh in the family of eight children. Bernard van Leer, the founder of the well-known barrel factory, was her brother.

While in Rome, Laetus brings Francisca van Leer in 1925 in contact with another friend of the Jews, the Holy Cross Father Anton van Asseldonk. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 1926 the trio starts with the movement 'Amici Israel'. It was intended as a 'union of priests for prayer, love for and the conversion of Israel'. At the end of the first year 18 cardinals, 200 bishops and 2000 priests were members of the 'Amici Israel'. They tried to obtain what the Second Vatican Council 40 years later achieved with the Declaration 'Nostra Aetate'. As they insisted too much at several Congregations, and as Francisca van Leer played a too great role in the discussions – at that time a woman should still be silent in the Church – the Amici Israel were suspended on Good Friday the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1928. My uncle came yearly from Rome to visit my family. I heard many times the name 'Francisca van Leer', but I failed to grasp the pain of the suspension of the 'Amici Israel'. In 1930 Father Laetus gave me a picture of himself before an altar, signed on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August in Delft. On the backside he had written "Peace over Israel". "Thy Kingdom come". I have always kept it.

As soon as my uncle came back from Rome in August 1934, he was put to a great work: the translation of the whole Old Testament from Hebrew into Dutch: the Franciscan Bible. Not long before my entering into the monastery I saw him in Katwijk in a room full of trestles with books. I remember very vividly that with the coming of Hitler to power my uncle was very worried. He was

in great tension about what the world history would bring. Shall the persecution of the Jews in Germany really be the end of Israel's sufferings?

Instead of a brother, God gave me three marvellous sisters and I am more grateful for that gift. What they have done and continue to do for me and for the Lavra is indescribable.

From my early youth I had expressed at home: "I hope once to become a priest". At the age of 12, before entering a secondary school, my parents were thinking about a place. Our parish organised some days of instruction for those who were about to make their solemn profession of faith. A Redemptorist Father gave the instructions. He took the opportunity to recommend the newly – built seminary 'Nebo' near Nijmegen in a beautiful environment. Without knowing anything about Redemptorists he caught me and I went there full of expectation at the age of 12. The people were good, and the surroundings were beautiful. But after 2 years I came in a deep spiritual crisis. This even affected my health strongly. I became aware that the Redemptorists could never be my spiritual home. After a great struggle something became very clear. I knew it. "I want to become a monk". Thanks to God that I have a sharp power of estimation in moral and food matters. It has helped me in many circumstances.

As soon as I made my decision known, the director told me that their seminary was no longer my place. At the age of 14 I returned to Delft and continued my studies at the Jesuit College in The Hague.

As I was longing to give a concrete form to my monastic aspirations, I went during vacations to one of the most famous Benedictine Abbeys in the Netherlands at that time: St Paul's at Oosterhout. At the beginning of the century the monks had been expelled from Wisques in France. The abbey had still a French character and a French Abbot. Many seminarians from different dioceses came there to observe and several of them entered. I spoke with them. Also our prime minister in that time, professors and artists came to participate in the prayer of the monks. I came there several times just after Christmas or Easter and was deeply moved by the beautiful Liturgy and the piety of the monks. Besides the Liturgy the monks spent a great part of the day on different kinds of studies. That was exactly what I wanted. I was a city boy.

About the same time I became good friends with two sons of a dentist. Another son was a monk in the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Refuge at Zundert, near the Belgian frontier. Once they had a free place in their car and invited me to join them for three days to the Abbey. After witnessing the life of the monks I thought: "Here never my life". The style of the monastery, the cultural level of the monks, the execution of the Divine Office could not compare with what I had experienced in Oosterhout. On top of that the monks spent daily five hours in manual work and I disliked farms, stables and agriculture. But some years later there was no place for me at Oosterhout during the Holy Week. I went instead with one of the sons of the dentist to Zundert.

Without my request I was even accepted for a week within the cloister. With my own eyes I saw the simple austerity of the monks and the lay brothers, their many hours in prayer. The Holy Week was never for me so holy as in that time. I came out overwhelmed.

That gave me a lot to think about. In Oosterhout I found exactly what I was looking for: piety, study and art in a selected company. But was there not the danger that I would remain too attached to these cultural pleasures and never push forward to a total dedication to God alone? Dr. Leo Baaten, the old dentist, who had practices in three places, but never became rich, as he was always helping the poor, was my spiritual adviser. In an inexplicable way the scruff of my neck took me: "If you want inner purity, you need a stronger remedy and you should seek it at the Trappists"

## ADULTHOOD

At the age of 18 my parents brought me to the Abbey of our Lady of Refuge at Zundert. The Abbot asked them if they had any preference for a new name for me at the monastery. Without hesitation my parents answered: "Adelbert". He was the founder of a famous Abbey in the North of Holland and my birthday was on his feast. I lost my name Jacob, the name of my grandfather.

On the feast of St. John the Baptist 1936 I received the monastic habit. The sermon of the Abbot was: "What will this child be?" and all looked at the young lad, half undressed in the middle of the Chapterroom. Though it was a feast, we were working the whole day in the fields, picking strawberries.

The novice master, Father Dominic, was a simple and sincere fellow. Several years in the army had marked him. To illustrate his teachings he read for us a lot of examples from Alphonsus Rodriguez, a seventeenth century Jesuit, who wrote an introduction to the religious life. The book was full of stories from the early oriental monks. Besides the Cistercian documents, this was all what was available about monastic sources. As I had entered as a choir monk, there followed almost automatically a formation to the priesthood. After one year of noviciate I started already with a course of scholastic philosophy, which I enjoyed very much and appreciated as an excellent introduction to further studies. Then I followed four years of Bible, Dogmatic and Moral Theology. Unfortunately Biblical studies received at that time not the attention they reserved. Dogmatic theology consisted of theses on the reasonability and truth of Catholic doctrine. For moral theology we had a better handbook, based on St. Thomas, but the professor was too delighted in casuistry, which had a great success in the last centuries.

The studies were in no way an impediment to my life as a monk, they gave it a better base. I lived in a great serenity of heart. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1941 I pronounced my solemn vows as a monk. I was ordained a priest on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1943. My Father had died in 1939, but the other members of the family were present at these great days. It all happened during the Second World War. After the conquest of our country by the Germans in May 1940 300 German soldiers encamped in the Abbey. During that time we could only use the basement and the church. They slaughtered a number of our cows and went on to Belgium and France. We heard very little about the war. The situation of the Jews, living in all the territories under the Nazi occupation, worried me terribly. We heard a bit about the Dutch resistance against the occupier, but that was all.

In 1942 the Nazis began to deport the Jews also in the Netherlands. Our bishops reacted firmly by pastoral letters and as a result of it at least 150 Catholics of Jewish origin died in the gas chambers with the others. In our mother Abbey Koningshoeven there were three monks of Jewish origin and in our feminine Abbey Koningsoord three sisters of the same family Löeb. We all knew that the Abbot of our mother Abbey was a very powerful man. I thought: "Wherever they take persons away, in these two monasteries under Dom Simon they will never succeed. But after some weeks he himself came to us to tell that all resistance was in vain.

My uncle Laetus was during the war in Heerlen (Limburg) in a parish. He spoke openly against the deportation of the Jews and was denounced by his own parishioners to the occupying authorities. At the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1942 he was caught and promptly brought to the concentrationcamp of Dachau. As he had a large wound at his foot, they used him immediately as an 'animal' for experimentation by infusing all kinds of serums in his leg to see the reaction. They did it for three years! In June 1945 he was freed and though he was an invalided, he came very soon to my monastery. I was here since 9 years as a young monk and priest of 27 years old. He gave for the whole community two beautiful conferences about his experiences in Dachau and also about his feelings after the Shoa. Until the end of the war we were still hoping that at least a part of the Jewish deportees would return home. He was bewailing the horrendous crime and the passive attitude of so many Christians, but dared also to say: "In spite of everything: This is a new beginning. In Psalm 117, the shortest of all, Israel is the precentor, inviting all the nations to praise God. And from now on it starts to happen". He added also: "I am old and invalided, but this adventure is so great, that I want to be myself a witness to depart for Palestine to take part in it". I thought immediately: "He is unable to do this because of his age and his invalidity". But all of a sudden there raise in my mind a tremendous desire to go in his place. We were after the war with 80 members, most of them young and capable. I proposed to the Abbot to go with a number of monks, as I saw it as something to be done by the Cistercian Order. The Abbot, Dom Alphonsus, was a good pragmatic man. He had been economist for years. I was totally different from him, but he liked me. He answered me: are you aware of the struggle that

is going on there between Palestinians and Jews, and that the majority of Christians there are follow the oriental tradition. Our community prefers rather to go to a young land with a young Church and a fresh-implanted monastic life". But at the end he said: "You are still very young. I don't want that you go now, but "if God wants it, He will open the door". This word gave me a great tranquillity. I should not force anything, fulfil my daily obligations, and if God really wanted it, He would open the way. I was already organist, sub cantor and sacristan. Other jobs followed. In 1951 I was appointed to be the novicemaster of the two noviciates: the choir monks and the lay brothers. They were about 15 monks and I found it a marvellous experience to become the confident and guide of these young men. I had also to prepare weekly conferences on different subjects; some of them were surely the great figures of the monastic ideal and they lived in the East. Besides St. Anthony and St. Pachom also Chariton, Eutymius, Sabas and St. John of Damascus became more alive for me. I was the first to learn while preparing these talks! Fortunately we were better equipped with monastic sources than when I entered in 1936. I was also a member of the counsel of the Abbot and from time to time I had the opportunity to make some suggestions.

It was for me a matter of conscience never to tell the novices about my own deep desire. I should not soak them off from their ideal: to become stabilized monks of Our Lady of Refuge. I considered that as my sacred responsibility.

When I was about five years in function as novicemaster, a new Abbot was chosen. I told him very soon about my desire, but he was adamant. After being seven years in the function of novicemaster, the Abbot said to me: "As you have other ideals, I find it irresponsible to maintain going on in that function". I agreed fully and another was appointed. That was in 1958.

In 1959 there was in Uden a great Congress on Liturgy in the missions. The Abbot delegated me spontaneously to participate. I had always taken a great interest in our new foundations but had some reservations about them: "too much weight of European power, too big buildings and too much stress on the Cistercian uniformity". The Congress was presided by Cardinal Gracias from Bombay, but many bishops and missionaries from everywhere took part in the Congress. We were together for one week and I felt very fortunate to meet Father Bede Griffiths O.S.B. who was since a few years in India and with whom I had fruitful talks. During that week I was assigned to celebrate at the Birgittine monastery with which we have very warm relations until now. A year later the Abbot proposed me equally spontaneously: "to go for a year to Rome and to study whatever I wanted". If they had proposed me that at the age of 24, I would have leapt for joy. Now I was 42, well rooted in the community and the Abbot did not indicate me any special subject. I hesitated for almost two months. But with the advise of some others I accepted and opted for the Oriental Institute, a special University for the Christian East.

Rome 1960-1961.

The General Abbot of the Trappists – he himself was a former architect – had built next to Tre Fontane a huge Generalate and Study House, to respond to the desire from Rome to have better equipped professors of theology and Bible in the monasteries. He concentrated this in Rome. I arrived there with 80 young Trappists from all over the world. The students were divided over three scriptoria 'study rooms', one for the students of Bible, one for the Dogmatic Theology and one for Moral Theology and Canon Law. As I was the only one in my kind, I was incorporated in the Biblical group. We prayed all together parts of the Office and we were brought by bus to the different universities. Everyone was supposed to celebrate his daily Mass, We were with about hundred priests and under the church there was a place with 25 altars. Within two hours this whole group had to celebrate. The understanding was to celebrate one Mass and to serve another. Among the students this place was called: "The Massodrome".

The Oriental Institute, though started with the Benedictines, was at least since 40 years in the hands of the Jesuits. They had some excellent professors: Father Alphons Raes, an elder Fleming, the Rector Irénée Hausherr, world famous on spirituality, Juan Mateos an exploring Liturgist. As we

were with not so many – about 50 full-time students – we lived in a familial atmosphere. I enjoyed most of all the lectures of Juan Mateos. He analysed the structure of the Divine Liturgy (the Mass) and the Hours. Though he spent most of his time on the origins of the Byzantine Liturgy, his preference went to the archaic Chaldean one. On Thursday and Sunday afternoon we could make a walk or visit something in Rome. One of my most cherished virtues was always the ‘eutrapelia’, the art to relax at the right time. There were students in my Bible scriptorium who never went out for a walk. They spent all their time with mugging. So at the end they were astonished that I finished my baccalaureate ‘cum laude’.

I had always hoped that the time would come to go with a group of Trappists monks to Israel. That appeared out of the question. My desire to go was still very intense. I talked with the Rector, Father Raes about the possibility to depart alone. My strategy was: though I was fond of the Orthodoxy in many respects, I wanted to stay within the Catholic Church, however absolutely not in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, but in the Melkite Catholic Church of Galilee. I thought ‘now or never’, though I pondered very well that it meant to leave my monastery where I was deeply rooted. Father Raes suggested to me: “Write it down briefly to your Abbot, but tell him that you hope to discuss it thoroughly at home, when you come back. If he accepts, you go. If he refuses, you have to forget it for good”. I thought about all the consequences, but in a way I had suffered the pain before it happened!

One of the students, Father George Mifsud, a Maltese, had been in Israel and spoke to me about Mgr. George Hakim, an open-minded man. He gave me his address.

At the end of the year I left Rome. The Abbot had written to me: ‘don’t come back to Zundert. Go to Westmalle, a Flemish Abbey in Belgium, three quarters drive from Zundert. There we shall discuss it. He came five weeks every Thursday. We cleared everything and at the end of the fifth week, he gave me his blessing to depart for Israel. He did not allow me to explain it to the community in Zundert. What had bubbled up for 16 years became a reality within two weeks. I wrote to Mgr. George Hakim and he answered: “come and see”. My cradle Zundert I have never forgotten.

## ISRAEL

I visited my family shortly. My mother was very understanding. Since years she knew my desires. From Zundert I had received only blessings, no money, but Westmalle paid half of my fly-ticket. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1961 I landed at Lod Airport around nine in the evening. It seemed to me as if I started to walk on a glowing plate. It was very hot. I took a taxi to the bishop’s house in Haifa. ‘Tante’ Nelly, the woman devoted to domestic business and dr. Anne Duives, a Dutch physician who worked already since years for the diocese, received me. The next day I saw the Bishop. He was very welcoming and friendly and told me that he was eager to have a monastic community in his diocese. I renewed my monastic vows in his hands. The bishop said to me immediately: “I am fully willing to accept you in our diocese, but you are not allowed to celebrate in the rite of the diocese. A group of Latin priests have obtained via the Apostolic Delegate a decree from the Holy Office that each Jew who wants to enter the Church through the Oriental gate must have a special permission from the Holy Office and each priest who wants to join the Melkite Diocese of Galilee must equally have a special permit from the Holy Office. I was indignant about this bizarre regulation. The intention was obviously to retain the monopoly for addressing the Jewish people for the Latin Church.

The first weeks I was in the Bishop’s house. The next day he took me already to Nazareth, where I made acquaintance with Adeline Peijskens, a Flemish woman, “The mother of St. Joseph’s seminary” and also with a small group of nuns of the Annunciation, who had started a monastic foundation shortly before us. We became very familiar with one another. I visited shortly the New Jerusalem, the only part that could be visited before 1967. As I was interested in contemplative communities and made acquaintance with all of them: The Benedictines, Carmelite and Claris sisters. They were pious little foreign islands. They all complained bitterly about the lack of local

vocations, but hardly anyone of the members spoke Hebrew or Arabic and the sign of vocation was "to be able to live on their level". The bishop took me also to some Arab marriages that I enjoyed very much. I told him: "I see I am here at the right place. Give me one year as observer, to know better the people and make serious beginnings with the two main languages: Hebrew and Arabic. Hebrew I knew a little. He accepted this without objection and asked me to go for some time to Acco, to be the priest of an old folks home (the former bishop's house) and to start with Arabic. The atmosphere was very good, but I had a lot of stomach trouble. The Arab food was too greasy for me. During the four months I spent there the Superior of Notre Dame de France in Jerusalem visited me together with another very known Assumptionist, Father Jean Roger. I showed them the beautiful old church with its Iconostasis and the house. They asked me about my plans. I told them frankly: "At the beginning of 1962 I hope to start an intensive course of Hebrew, but I have no money and no place". I never felt so much the vow of poverty since I had left Zundert. "That is easy", they replied, "you are our guest for all the time required". And indeed, at the beginning of the year I moved to Jerusalem and was warmly welcomed by the Assumptionist Fathers. I found a very good plan and started with pleasure the intensive course of five hours a day.

Slowly on I became also acquainted with all the expatriate priests of Jerusalem. There was a priestly reunion every month. They asked me about my project. Almost everybody reacted negatively. Two priests who had originally joined our Melkite diocese of Galilee. Little Brother Yohanan Elihai and Father Alfred Delmée told me that this Byzantine Rite with its pomp and the Arab people with their traumatic experiences made it totally in-adapted to approach the Jewish people. Why to join this backward Diocese? Choose rather the 'Oeuvre of St. Jacques'! One sister who did my laundry asked me: "What are you beginning?" When I answered: "" Hopefully a Melkite monastery". "What, she said, ""you are leaving the Rite of the Pope"? She continued to do my laundry with less pleasure. However, I had my own well-rooted conviction and was determined to go on that way without opposing or envying the 'Oeuvre of St. Jacques'. May they all produce good fruits. After the five months in Jerusalem I went still for two months to Isfyia on Mt. Carmel, to continue my Arabic studies.

I was totally without funds and when a candidate from the Netherlands wanted to join me, I made a trip to Europe. First of all I went to Rome, where I enjoyed the hospitality of the Greek monastery of Grotta Ferrata. This was a good experience. My main purpose was to get my permit from the Holy Office for my passage of Rite with the assistance of the procurer General of the Trappists, Father Deodatus de Wilde. We paid two visits without success.

In the Netherlands and Belgium I visited many friends and I had also to do some fundraising. The bishop had offered us an empty villa at the edge of Nazareth. I tried also to bring the necessary furniture. At the end of November 1962 Mr. Theo Koperdraat the candidate and I, took the boat from Marseille to Haifa and in December we entered our new house. Sylvain, a French-Christian of Jewish origin, wanted also to join us. Father Basilios Laham gave us beds, blankets, and the first utensils for the kitchen. At the beginning of January Theo Koperdraat went already to an intensive course of Hebrew. The other, Sylvain, knew it already.

At the beginning of 1962 we had talks with Mgr. Hakim about the special aim of our community. It would be prayer, certain seclusion and a simple life. But I emphasized also that the Melkites together with the Orthodox are the deepest-rooted Christian group in this country. We are here since 2000 years and share with the Jewish people a common origin and a common destiny. We cannot shun one another. I asked if our community could especially prepare our Melkite community for the presence of the Jewish people and to dialogue with them.

We were fully aware that this was delicate, because of the traumatic experiences of so many Galilean Christians. But Msgr. Hakim was a broadminded man with vision. He liked initiatives. Not only he accepted our proposal without objection, he was even pleased with it. Not all his successors would have been so easy to accept this point. Consequently we asked if Hebrew could become our first language. This we have practiced now for 40 years. Surely, if Arab postulants will join us, we let him say his parts of the Office in Arabic. If at Sunday a majority of Arab Christians participate,



we switch to Arabic. After one and a half year of correspondence, Father Toma Farelly, an American Trappist, joined us on the first of April 1964. He persevered and is the co-founder of Lavra Netofa.

As the villa in Nazareth was only temporally, we were searching through the whole of Galilee to find a suitable place. It was here that Jesus was leading his hidden life! We found six places; the most attractive of them were Ma'aloul, a destroyed village not far from Kfar Ha Horesh, and a plot of land between Rameh and Bukeyia. But the Government offices turned down all our requests. At the end I had a file of six refusals!

A good friend of us, Dr. Jan Sanders, a priest and professor in Semitic languages in the Netherlands, spent some time in Israel and one day he made a walk to Jebel Hazwah, a hill above the village with the son of the Christian Mughtar of Deir Hanna, Mr. Taufiq Habib. Since the State of Israel this place is called "Mount Netofa". Dr. Sanders was amazed by the beauty of the place and said: "I have a friend in Nazareth: a monk who is since six years looking for a place. Would it be possible to purchase here some land? Taufiq answered: "My Father has very good relations with the Muslim Mughtar, the owner of most of this hill. We shall approach him". Very soon I made contact. Ali Othman Hatieb was a lovely old man with three wives and a lot of children and grandchildren. One of them wanted to study and gave a push to his old grandfather, accompanying him during all the negotiations. It took many months, although money was not the main issue. They wanted to find out if we were worthy of their confidence.

I asked Msgr Hakim what to do now, to inform the authorities or just to settle. He advised us the last: "That is the only way to succeed and the Jews have done the same"!

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1967, three weeks after the Six-Day we went to the Mountain. Two tractors were hardly able to bring us to a higher point. There was no road, no water, and no house. We lived for almost four months in a large tent. The place was marvellous and we thanked God for all the refusals. The hardships of the moment we took into the bargain. With a bulldozer we opened a road with a length of three kilometres from the village to us. Now we could bring the building materials with our new jeep. Abu Shoukry Abboud and his sons built two barracks from second hand material. Just before the rain started we entered our first home.

In 1963 we had already received our recognition as a 'monasterium sui juris' from Msgr Hakim and this was confirmed by the Patriarch Maximos IV Sayyegh. After one year I was called to the military governor of Galilee and his architect in Nazareth. They were very angry: "What have you done without a permit and that on a strategic point?" At first I was inclined to blow equally high from the tower: "Our Church is here present since 2000 years. The monastic life is an essential element of our Church. I have done the utmost to get your recognition and for six years you have sent me only refusals". However, I recollected: "Let me be modest and try to remain calm". I told them: "According to Ottoman Law, that is still valid, you are always allowed to build a shed on your property. Our Bishop Msgr Hakim wanted to inform you after three months, but he was called away, he became Patriarch and now he is in Damascus. We have not yet a successor. Who am I to inform you"? They replied: "You have built more than a shed". Finally they calmed down and agreed. "You are allowed to stay, but under one condition: nothing additional may be erected on this place". I did not promise anything and they let me go.

I was already dreaming of one thing and that came now all of a sudden in sight. Not far from our barracks, a bit higher, was a large cave, used by the shepherds in wintertime. This cave was almost 7 by 13 meters but very shallow, at the utmost only one meter twenty. This might become a chapel, without a permit and is a challenge to so many proud churches with towers. This time I had to approach a Muslim with two wives and a large family. On all the Muslim feasts I visited him, but it was harder. It took three years and a half of negotiations and much coffee drinking. Finally his second wife came on our side – and behind the scenes the ladies are quite powerful. She convinced



him that he could do something beautiful, that we were good people and that he could live without that piece of land. Finally we were able to buy it. Later on the lady told me: "The first time you travel to Holland, take my husband with you in the plane and when you arrive above the sea drop him". Almost immediately after we acquired the cave, Toma, my pragmatic confrater said: "We are in need of more water. The cave has to become a cistern". I answered: "Never! We are a monastic community and we need a decent chapel. For this I went through those endless negotiations". "Good", said Toma: "You make the chapel, let me plant trees". He planted thousands of them. When we arrived, the hill was almost bare.

To carve out the cave to make a chapel was a heavy job. We needed pickaxes, chisels, shovels and a pulley and most of all: workmen. It required three years of steady work with guests and volunteers. The original entrance, big and round, became a huge window in the ceiling. We cut out a new entrance and made steps down. In May 1973 the cave Msgr Joseph Raya inaugurated chapel. It was a moved ceremony and many friends were present.

Several candidates entered and left. Our life was not easy, no running water, no electricity and the first years no heating in the winter. We tried it three times with women. Each time we had only one woman. If they should have had a former monastic formation and were more numerous, it would have gone better. In our circumstances it was not conducive to unity and peace. Brother Gustavo left us after fourteen years with us. Brother Cornelius from the Netherlands joined us nine years ago and brother Nathanael from Laos is since more than two and a half year with us as a novice.

In spite of our firm resolution I have failed in several respects, the others too made mistakes. We have our own limitations and have to live with the limitations of the others. To grow together as a true family requires daily love and forgiveness. We added several buildings for monks and for guests. People from all over the country, Jews and Palestinians, frequently visit our cave chapel. We have excellent relations also with the Muslims of Deir Hanna and are even considered as a kind of grandfathers. Quite a number of Israelis like to spend some days of recollection with us. They all experience our place as an oasis of peace.

It took 26 years to be officially recognized by the government. Four years we made master plans and paid visits to officials in Jerusalem and Nazareth. Finally Mr. Arikraz, the mayor of the 30 settlements around us helped us a lot to be legalised. "You are a very positive element in the area. You have good relations with all and you should be finally accepted".

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of July we were 25 years on the mountain. Many friends came to celebrate with us and on that occasion the bishop gave me the blessing as Hegumen! In the East everything goes in superlatives: officially I am an Archimandrite of four monks.

In the mean time we are 35 years on the mountain. We consider our presence as a daily miracle. By God's grace we are what we are. We hope that some young people from Israel and from abroad will join us. Every vocation to a consecrated life is born in prayer and contemplation, from moments of intense communion and deep friendship with Christ. From there expands the desire to be always with the Lord and to follow Him. "How good it is for us to be here"(Mt. 17:4).

We hope to continue as "watchmen looking for the morning".

Father Ya'aqov Willebrands.