

October 2016. Greetings from the new ETRFI president

I would like to extend my greetings to ETRFI members and supporters, and to all those of you who follow or take some interest in our activities wherever you are in the world!

My name is Peter Ashton. I am a catholic priest and member of the franciscan province based here in Jerusalem known as the Custody of the Holy Land. I was born in England in 1960 and have had experience in many countries. I first visited Israel in 1982, and have a great love for this country and her people. I first attended a meeting of the ETRFI I think back in 1989 if I am not mistaken, while still in the philosophy years of seminary education which was then in our large franciscan monastery at Manger Square in Bethlehem. I remember meeting some of the well known names of the fraternity back then, including Marcel du Bois OP. I was away from Israel after ordination for several years, and with assignments after that which included 10 years in Jaffa-Tel Aviv I was rarely able to attend meetings. The last 3 years, however, I found myself back in Jerusalem, and I discovered that my interest in the fraternity had never really gone away. I do hope that I will now be able to enter in more fully to fraternity activities!

Some of my earliest memories of meetings were of feelings of intellectual inadequacy in the presence of scholars and professors and various learned and well-informed people, and being unable to understand why they were friendly and welcoming towards me! I used to wish that I also might dare to raise my hand after the lecture to make a profound comment or pose a well-framed question that might lead to nods of approval and insightful discussion! I also remember a fraternity day-out which took us to Sephoris. There at the amphitheatre I heard a brief explanation of the amphitheatre and words of introduction to the site which opened my heart for the first time. I realised for the first time that the stones I was looking at had been placed there by real people, and this became part of a growing understanding for me personally that we are part of a family which not only extends around the world, but which also extends backwards in time.

The ETRFI has continued to organise encounters between members of this amazing family, encounters which give brothers and sisters and uncles and cousins a chance to speak. I am sure that when we speak, not only do attempt to communicate to others and to be heard by them, but we also discover really about ourselves who we are, what we believe, and how very deeply affected we have been by the past. We are Christians and we study and pray together. We have a special focus: our relationship with Judaism and with the Jewish people. Combining a sense of wishing to extend a welcome to those who come to us, we desire to offer a combination of profound respect in the context of honesty and of intellectual pursuits, which are expressed in lecture series and seminars and study days. We hope to maintain our tradition of making the fruits of our research available both in form of printed publications and digital formats - document and audio file - on the internet.

This year will unfold with many surprises according to God's providence, as we begin our lectures under the theme-title "Christians and Jews sitting and working together as brothers." So many changes have happened in Christian-Jewish relationships over the last several decades, many perhaps in ways that were behind the scenes, almost unnoticed, probably unexpected. Real people have been involved. People with their own personal history, people who have names, people we can meet and talk to and perhaps get to know. Some of these people may at first come across as being distant from us because they may be very learned or particularly gifted in other ways. At a meeting of the fraternity we get a chance to meet our 'distant' (!) relatives and to give thanks that we are part of a very gifted family. And perhaps we get a chance to be part of that special and oh-so-needed miracle - the process of healing between members of a family that has been through so much, and which is longing to come through to a time of freedom and fruitfulness and discovery of a fuller, richer experience of life.

Please always pray for God's blessing on our meetings... and come along whenever you can!