Elsewhere in The Observer David Isgur describes vividly the University delegation’s trip to Israel to meet Pope John Paul II, among other things.

On Friday morning, March 24, just before I left my hotel to meet the pope, I received an e-mail message from my friend, Craig Franz. Craig is a Christian Brother and president of St. Mary’s College in California. Here’s what he wrote:

“Sure. I dedicate my entire life to the Catholic Church. I take demanding vows and live austerely in monasteries. I get up early in the morning for pre-dawn prayers in cold chapels. I do all this, and the Jewish kid from Connecticut is the one picked to go visit the pope in the Holy Land. Where is there justice in the world?”

Brother Craig’s kidding aside, late March was a very moving time for a Jew to be in Israel. Our trip took us there, with representatives from other schools involved in a multi-university consortium to excavate the ruins of Bethsaida, a fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. We toured a number of ancient sites associated with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; we presented the pope with a replica of an ancient key found at Bethsaida; and we spent some time at Bethsaida itself, unveiling a plaque that lists the names of the 17 universities in the consortium.

In a very moving way, our trip to Israel mirrored the pope’s trip, and what we saw echoed his clearly articulated goals of bringing Jews, Christians, and Muslims together in this badly divided area of the world. We not only visited a number of the places the pope visited, we also were doing so at a time when his visit and his vision for a world of forgiveness and peace offer a window of hope for this region and our world.

It is hard to describe the enormous historical and contemporary tensions one feels in this ancient and holy country. Jerusalem itself is the most striking example. The Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and the Dome of the Rock—three of the holiest places for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are located in an area no larger than the University of Hartford campus. They have coexisted (uneasily, to be sure) for almost two centuries, each in its own right a destination for pilgrims from all over the world. Both our delegation and the pope are now among those pilgrims.

We also visited Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial, the day before the pope visited there and expressed his deep sorrow about the ghastly destruction that the Holocaust brought to six million Jews. No one can visit Yad Vashem without being deeply moved and without understanding why Israel came to exist as a safe haven for Jews, a country they could call their own.

At Bethlehem University, one of the leading Palestinian universities, we saw another story of a dispossessed people. But at Bethlehem University I saw hope for the region—the optimism and the opportunity for its young people to lead their lives productively and in peace. I saw this also in the faces of the Christian youth who had come from all over the world to worship with the pope, and in the faces of Israeli youth who are working hard to keep their country stable and free.

Strangely and movingly, I saw this at Bethsaida, which we visited on the last day of our trip. Richard Freund, director of the University’s Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies, and his Israeli colleague Rami Arav, now a professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, have led this archaeological excavation for almost 15 years now. Bethsaida, lost for almost two centuries, was the home of Jesus’ disciples who were fishermen, most notably St. Peter. There is wonderful irony in a Jewish historian and a Jewish archaeologist leading the effort to unearth an ancient town of central importance to Christianity, where Jesus performed many of his miracles. There at Bethsaida we could see homes that the disciples knew and a street they and Jesus walked down.

But Bethsaida is not only historical; it is also the site of contemporary tension. Located on what was until 1967 the border between Israel and Syria, its future is now in the hands of the Israelis and Syrians, who are beginning to talk about a negotiated settlement in the Golan Heights. On the very hour of the very day we visited Bethsaida, President Clinton and President Assad of Syria were meeting in Geneva to try to begin those talks. Now in Israeli-controlled territory, it may or may not stay that way if a peace treaty is negotiated.

This is not an empty question. We saw at Bethsaida clear evidence of the last time it was in Syrian hands—bunkers and gun locations that the Syrians had built right into the ruins, then simply an unexcavated mound. In the hometown of Jesus’ disciples, at a site where Jesus performed miracles, the Syrians had waged war as recently as 33 years ago.

I returned from this trip with hope and not despair in my heart. Amid the ruins and pottery shards of Bethsaida, within the walls of some of the world’s holiest sites, and within the hearts of young people in Israel and throughout the world, I saw a hope for peace.

President Harrison and Regents Chairman Arnold C. Greenberg at the Bethsaida excavation.

Walter Harrison