

HE IS NOT HERE

CARDINAL TIMOTHY M. DOLAN
with LINO RULLI

HE IS NOT HERE

The Holy and Living Land

FOREWORD *by* JONATHAN ROUMIE

WORD  on FIRE.

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Foreword

Jonathan Roumie

The second time I met Pope Francis was back in 2022, almost exactly a year after my first, unforgettable encounter with the Holy Father. This time, I decided I would bring my parents with me. They had never been to Italy. In fact, they'd never been to any country on the European continent. A devoted, working-class existence dedicated to raising three kids didn't allow for a whole lot of room for exotic travel for our family. So bringing mom and dad to Rome to experience its treasures—and ultimately, its leaders—felt like a once-in-a-lifetime gift for them. They were not disappointed. They were moved to tears at times by the beauty, history, and sacredness of Rome's hallowed sites, with Saint Peter's Basilica being the crown jewel of their trip.

But one of the fondest moments for me during our time there was an encounter we had with one of the Church's sons.

Around the time I brought my parents to Rome, there happened to be a consistory taking place, for which cardinals from around the world had been summoned to the Eternal City. While in town, we were guests of the Pontifical North American College (or the NAC, as it's known), where we stayed for the duration of our trip. One morning while we were there, I got a message saying Cardinal Timothy Dolan was going to be around and would love to connect.

I'd met him prior and found him, at once, endlessly entertaining yet humbly pastoral. His Eminence was never without a hearty handshake, a warm smile, and a witty barb in his back pocket. Case in point, when he first met my parents, he introduced himself with a joke about a man who had imbibed slightly too much wine at a wedding in Nazareth at which the child Jesus was in attendance. The next morning, the man grabbed a servant

and requested a couple of aspirins and some water to alleviate the pain, but pleaded with the servant to “keep the kid away from the water!” Belly laughs all around.

His mirth was (and continues to be) infectious. When I look back through the photos of the four of us at the NAC, all I can see are wide smiles and open mouths—each of us, at one point or another, doubled over in laughter. The connection with him that morning instantly became one of my parents’ favorite moments of their trip. Although they had never met him before, he made them feel like he’d known them their entire lives. His Eminence has a lovely habit of doing that, whether he’s talking with you or writing for you, as he does in this beautiful volume. The love and spirit of Christ abide with Cardinal Dolan wherever he goes. His sense of fun and adventure is unfailing, as is his witness as a joy-filled disciple of Christ, which he brings in charming abundance to this scripturally elevated travel reflection through the homeland of our Lord.

As a devoted Catholic and history aficionado, this is the kind of book I wish I’d had available to me when I first started preparing to play Jesus in *The Chosen*. Often referred to as the “fifth Gospel,” the Holy Land described in Scripture vividly comes to life in these pages in a rich and detailed way—not only through the vibrant color photographs but also through Cardinal Dolan’s engaging prose. With his signature warmth and relatability, he reflects on seminal moments in the life and ministry of Christ, placing you smack in the middle of the Gospel narratives.

Throughout the various interviews and encounters I’ve had with Cardinal Dolan over the years, I’ve always felt that his charisma and care for the people he meets are traits that Jesus Himself would have possessed in abundance. I also walk away from every encounter with him edified by some reflection or nugget of wisdom that ultimately draws me deeper into my own devotion to Jesus. This book will masterfully do that for you too, bringing

you closer to the Lord, His family, and His people, chapter by chapter.

There is no doubt in my mind that—guided by the cardinal’s knowledge, observations, and insights—you will be inspired and encouraged to experience in person the sacred land of our Savior’s earthly life. I certainly was. (Then again, if His Eminence were writing about his favorite hole-in-the-wall sandwich shop in some dingy alley in New York City, I’d probably be just as compelled to visit it too. Thankfully, this isn’t that book.)

In the chapter on the Sea of Galilee, Cardinal Dolan quotes from Saint John Henry Newman: “God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another.” It is clear to me that His Eminence, too, was created for a definite service, and it’s reaching people with the gospel. One of the many gifts and talents he has for doing that, as this book attests, is the vividness and poignance with which he writes. With an ever-curious mind, His Eminence lives out his vocation voraciously through the exploration of these most sacred locations and the Scripture that frames them.

It has been such a gift to get to know and learn from Cardinal Dolan, and I am honored to be able to call him friend. And I know that as you walk through the Holy Land, guided by the vivid and thought-provoking meditations of His Eminence (and Lino Rulli), you will find your own heart drawing ever closer to our Lord in service to Him.

May 25, 2026

Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary,

Mother of the Church

Prologue

It was April 14, 2024, at 1:50 a.m.

I was asleep in Jerusalem when the air sirens went off.

That sentence alone tells you something about the Holy Land, doesn't it? For many people, those words fit perfectly together: *Jerusalem* and *sirens*. Conflict. Danger. Headlines. History that never seems to stop repeating itself. But let me tell you what it felt like.

I was in Jerusalem with a small contingent of folks: my co-author, Lino Rulli; my longtime communications director, Joe Zwilling; and my priest secretary, Father Ryan Muldoon. We were guests of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, CNEWA, a remarkable organization that for generations has quietly and faithfully served the people of the Holy Land and the broader Middle East. We had spent our days visiting holy sites—places soaked in Scripture, prayer, and centuries of devotion—and meeting the people CNEWA serves: families, clergy, religious sisters, refugees, mothers, and children.

That night, we were staying at the Notre Dame Center, just outside the Old City walls. Before we went to bed, we were told where the bomb shelter was. No drama. No panic. Just information. That too tells you something about life in this land.

When the air raid sirens sounded, we woke up immediately. Iranian missiles were aimed at Israel. And so, like so many before us and so many around us, we did what people do there: We went underground and took shelter. For about half an hour, we waited.

I wish I could tell you that I was fearless, or that I was serenely quoting psalms. The truth is more ordinary and more human. I felt nervous but safe, alert yet secure. I felt oddly calm. There we were, sitting together beneath one of the most contested pieces

of land on earth, waiting for an all clear. And then it came. We returned to our rooms. We went back to sleep.

By morning, we were on a bus heading to Bethlehem for Sunday Mass in the Palestinian territories. People were going to church. Shopkeepers were opening their doors. Restaurants were preparing for lunch. It was as if the attack had never happened.

That's why I begin this book with that story. When people think of the Holy Land, they think almost exclusively of war and conflict. A fight over land and borders that seems endless. A place defined by what divides rather than what unites. A land frozen in hostility.

But that's not the whole story. It's not even the best story. There's so much more to this place.

In America, we have a saying: "*Never forget where you came from.*" It's good advice for individuals, for families, for communities. It's even better advice for believers. We Catholics—indeed, all Christians—must never forget where we came from. We came from *here*. From this land. From these hills and valleys. From these streets and stones. From these sacred acres of the Lord's vineyard.

This is where Jesus walked. Where He preached and healed. Where He was born, where He died, where He rose. This is where His holy Mother lived and loved and suffered. This is where the Church was born, trembling and hopeful, in the shadow of the resurrection.

And whenever I'm in the Holy Land, my thoughts turn again and again to mothers.

Isn't that how life works? In moments of great joy and deep sorrow, we instinctively think of our mothers. They're there at our beginning. They stand with us in our suffering. They hold the family together when everything else feels like it's coming apart.

In the Holy Land—so often marked by trauma, uncertainty, and loss—mothers are always on the front lines. Mothers with babies. Mothers with young children. Mothers doing what mothers have always done: protecting life, nurturing hope, carrying

burdens quietly and courageously. I think of the Blessed Mother. This was *her* land. These were *her* roads and hills. She knew fear. She knew displacement. She knew what it was to flee danger with a child in her arms. She knew what it was to watch her son suffer and die.

I think, too, of Holy Mother Church: still present here, still serving, still loving, still refusing to abandon her children no matter how difficult the circumstances.

And I think of my own mother. My mom died at the age of ninety-three. I thank God for her long life, a good life, a life filled with love. When she died, something dawned on me that I hadn't fully grasped before: I don't have a home in the way most people do. I'm not married. I don't have children. For an unmarried priest like me, *home* is where your mother lives. Even in the last years of her life, when she moved to assisted living, if I said I was going home from New York City to Saint Louis, everyone knew what that meant: I was going to see my mom.

When she died, I felt a quiet ache. Not just grief but a subtle disorientation. Where is home now? And then, as grace so often does, the answer came gently but clearly. As Catholics, as believers, we're never without a mother. We have the Blessed Mother of Jesus. We have Holy Mother Church. And we have a Mother Church rooted in the Holy Land.

This place isn't just a destination; it's an origin. It's not merely a land we visit; it's a land we belong to.

This is where it all started. This is where God stepped into history and changed it forever. We're family here. We're one.

This book is an invitation—to remember where you came from, to see beyond the headlines, to encounter the Holy Land not just as a battleground but as a birthplace. A place of faith, resilience, suffering, hope, and, yes, love.

It's an invitation to come home.

Let's now start this book with a prayer, the Angelus—the word *angelus* being the Latin for “angel,” the first word of the

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traditional prayer said at our first stop on our journey through the Holy Land.

The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary,
and she conceived of the Holy Spirit.
Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you;
blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners
now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord,
Be it done unto me according to your Word.
Hail Mary . . .

And the Word was made flesh,
And dwelt among us.
Hail Mary . . .

Pray for us, O holy Mother of God,
That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray. Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, Your grace into our hearts: that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ Your Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by His passion and cross be brought to the glory of His resurrection.
Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.