



Photos by Marsha Stithem Kalkowski / The Register

Father Chris Goodwin of Hastings, Neb., celebrates Mass in the grotto in Shepherds' Field, east of Bethlehem in the village of Beit Sahur, during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Concelebrating are Father Peter Mitchell and Father Rand Langhorst, both of Seward, Neb. Deacon Kenneth Wehrs, a second-year seminarian, was among the pilgrims.

Why a pilgrimage?

Holy Land calls to people of faith

By Marsha Stithem Kalkowski

For The Register

JERUSALEM — If a faithful person desires a journey to the Holy Land, a pilgrimage is the only way to go.

Sitting in silence before the Greek Orthodox chapel marking the site on the rock of Golgotha where the cross of the crucified Christ once stood, with reverent men and women from almost every corner of the globe bowing, kissing the stone, pressing their holy items into the cavity in the center of the silver disk, could be the experience of anyone traveling to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

But to sit there in prayer while waiting for your own personal Mass to begin in the tomb of Joseph of Aramathea is only going to happen if you are in the traveling company of a member of the clergy with the right connections.

If on a sight-seeing tour of the sacred places of

Scripture, focusing on Biblical tradition — and there are certainly plenty to choose from — your experience in the Holy Land may be fulfilling but certainly not as faithfully enriching as it would be if on a pilgrimage.

OUR PILGRIMAGE, sponsored by Tekton Ministries of Carmel, Ind., started long before the 13 hours in the air. It started before some of the pilgrims even applied for their passports.

Once we made our initial deposit, we received a scriptural study guide, listing the sacred sites of our journey and the references to review. Those who took that time to prepare were blessed with insight and clarity when the words of our guide were spoken amidst the throng of pilgrims waiting on the crowded steps or in the ancient alleyways of Jerusalem or on the bus heading north along the Jordan River to Upper

Galilee, while cameras clicked nonstop trying to capture the Beduins and their camps, the shepherds and their flocks, the date tree plantations or the banana tree groves.

We also enjoyed a pre-departure orientation meeting giving pilgrims a chance to meet and ask questions. One of the special joys of that opportunity was that we started praying for each other right away. We exchanged e-mails and shared insights regularly about packing, preparing and even giving hints about best dealing with the 8-hour time difference.

Those prayers continued as we made the faith journey together. We even used our layover time in the Chicago airport to have a Mass in Terminal C's chapel. We had daily Mass throughout the pilgrimage, but not just anywhere.

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The last Station of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa is inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Jesus' tomb is surrounded by a rotunda, where pilgrims stopped to pray.



Stopping at the inner ports of Tiberius, the pilgrims board a boat to sail the Sea of Galilee. They later stopped at Tabgha, the site of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes.



A local guide, who had degrees in archeology, theology and tourism, shares insights about the ancient ruins of the temple of Capernaum, the site of many miracles and the home of disciples Peter, Andrew, James, John and Matthew, who were fishermen.

The pilgrims begin the Stations of the Cross, with several carrying a large wooden cross.



Pilgrims pray together before exploring the grotto on the Mount of Olives at the Church of the Pater Noster.



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Pilgrims could rent a white baptismal garment and enter the River Jordan at Yardenit to renew their baptismal vows. There were also options that didn't involve submersion. A closed circuit television system allowed pilgrims who couldn't get to the water's edge to see what was happening on the shore.

Pilgrims provided special opportunities

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With three priests in our group, it was possible to have Mass in the Grotto of Gethsemane, the cave chapel in Bethlehem's Shepherd's Field, the Church of Lazarus in Bethany, the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Chapel at Mount Carmel in Haifa, twice on the Mount of Beatitudes and three times in the Holy Sepulcher itself.

If you aren't on a pilgrimage, your tour bus might stop in a church when a Mass is under way, even better if the Mass being said happens to be in a language you understand. We had tour groups pop in and out of our Masses and even take pictures of us,

as if we were part of the sacred sites themselves.

The tours groups and locals barely noticed, though, as we sang and prayed our way through the Christian Quarter of Old Jerusalem with a 10-foot wooden cross walking the Via Dolorosa, the traditional Stations of the Cross. We even had the Church of All Nations at the Garden of Gethsemane all to ourselves for a twilight holy hour. A special guided tour of the Shroud of Turin exhibit and an evening on the terrace overlooking the Old City were bonuses that our priests arranged on the spot.

ONE OF THE EXTRA blessings of a pilgrimage is the opportunity to stay in "pilgrim houses" instead of hotels. We enjoyed the Pontifical Institute of the Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem, where Pope Benedict stayed in May, the Mount of Beatitudes Guest House in Tiberius, where Pope John Paul II stayed twice, and the Mount Carmelite Center in Haifa. Breakfasts and evening meals were buffets or served family style, and this gave us plenty of opportunity to break bread together.

Our group ranged from a 16-year-old high school junior to an 84-year-old great-grandmother. This was never a problem and simply provided more opportunity for growth and understanding. While evenings provided personal time for reflection, journaling, personal prayer and additional excursions, they also gave time for group song, another decade of the

Rosary or a Divine Mercy Chaplet, family stories, card-playing and even an occasional line-up at the communal lobby computer for e-mailing home and sharing the experiences of the day.

If we weren't on a pilgrimage, there would not have been the opportunity for a renewal of our baptismal vows in the River Jordan, and eight couples would not have been able to be reunited in their marriage commitment at Cana.

HAVING EXPERIENCED pilgrims in the group made sure that we made time for a few non-religious but certainly fulfilling stops to shop for Bethlehem olive wood souvenirs, ride a camel, test out the natural spa elements of the Dead Sea and even check if the McDonald's menu is the same in Israel as it is back home.

Even with armed Palestine Authority soldiers on

every corner near the Separation Wall in Bethlehem and a riot on the streets of Jerusalem between sects of Orthodox Jews, we felt safe. Our men in collars gave us the security to trust in our Muslim bus driver and our local Christian guide.

So if you want to walk the same ground, breathe the same air, see the same deserts, mountains and valleys as the founders of our faith, a pilgrimage in the Holy Land is an opportunity that shouldn't be overlooked.

Marsha Stithem Kalkowski is a Salina native and graduate of Sacred Heart High School. A graduate of Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., she teaches at Marian High School in Omaha. She went on the pilgrimage Aug. 2-13 with her mother, Clara Stithem, of Salina and her mother-in-law, Kay Lynn Kalkowski, of Lincoln, Neb.



Marsha Stithem Kalkowski



The Church of the Visitation in Ein Karem where, according to tradition, the Virgin Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth.



A Nebraska couple on the pilgrimage take a camel ride on the route to Jericho.



Phillipsburg residents Darla and Aaron Harman and their daughter Jenay Winters of Gering, Neb., have their photo taken by fellow pilgrim Charlotte Volnek of Seward, Neb., on their last night in the Holy Land. Behind them is the Mediterranean Sea and the ports of Haifa.