



## Pilgrimage to The Holy Land

by Edward W. Schmidt, SJ

**W**hen the seven Paris scholars who formed the first group of Jesuits gathered in the early morning of August 14, 1534, to commit themselves to the Lord's mission, they pronounced a vow of poverty, of chastity, and of going to the Holy Land to work for the good of souls. The Holy Land? That is not included in the usual triad of religious vows! But there was a lot that was not usual in this early morning commitment.

Ignatius Loyola, the inspirational leader of the group, was in his mid forties, a Basque gentleman, still burning with a con-

version experience already a decade past. The others ranged in age down to late teens and came from varied parts of Spain, from France, and from Portugal. They were not ready to commit themselves to traditional religious life, which would have included a vow of obedience. But they felt a deep religious fervor that drove them to serve the Lord. And from the profound experience that Ignatius had felt as a pilgrim in Jerusalem, these "friends in the Lord" were determined to see the contours of the land that Jesus had seen, to walk paths he had walked, and to serve there as he had served.

Circumstances changed and Ignatius's companions were never able to get to the Holy Land. They put themselves at the service of the pope, who suggested that they make Rome their Jerusalem. They prayed and talked and listened, and in the end they formed the Society of Jesus. Late in life, though, almost as if the first fervor still burned in the same way, Ignatius still referred to himself as "the pilgrim."

Two years ago (*Partners*, fall 2006), I wrote about the power of pilgrimage in many religious traditions; about the image of "the way" in Christian scripture and his-

In June 2008, Fr. Edward Schmidt, SJ, (fourth from left), with the help of Frs. Jim Collins and Michael Conley (both at left), led a pilgrimage to the Holy Land for men in the First Studies phase of Jesuit formation.

Attendees included Eric Sundrup, Jim Shea, Eric Styles, Richard Beebe, Mike Singhurse, and Joe Koczera (not pictured).

tory and how Christian seekers search for God's will; about Ignatius the pilgrim and the draw of Jerusalem upon his imagination and that of his followers.

I had just returned from making a retreat in Jerusalem with other US Jesuit provincials under the guidance of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, SJ. This profound experience prompted me to want to share it. Cardinal Martini agreed to lead 22 young Jesuits, men in later years of formation, mostly from the Chicago and Detroit provinces, in their own retreat pilgrimage the following June.

This retreat accomplished what a pilgrimage is supposed to. It got the young Jesuits out of the places, sights, electronic connections and signals of everyday life. It set them down where seekers of the past have together experienced the sacred, the mystery, the holy. It sent them home more fully aware of God's presence and mission in their lives.

This past summer, I repeated the experience with the younger men in formation. Cardinal Martini was not available, but with some of his materials and with retreat directors, nine younger Chicago province Jesuits entered into their own biblical pilgrimage: walking the streets of Nazareth and Jerusalem, seeing waves of the Sea of Galilee and the flow of the Jordan, taking in the contours of Judean hillside. Here some of these pilgrims share their experiences with you. ■



Fr. Edward W. Schmidt, SJ,  
is the provincial of the  
Chicago Province of the  
Society of Jesus.

Before our retreat, we spent a few days in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, and around the Sea of Galilee, where he did most of his early ministry. This is a more rural and isolated part of the country, lacking the cultural pedigree of other places in the Eastern Mediterranean. I was struck by the landscape, but when I stood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee for the first time, I thought to myself, "Is this it?" I had figured that it would be much larger—in reality, it is only about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. I was a little disappointed.

Mark Twain has a wonderful passage in *The Innocents Abroad* in which he relates his experience of seeing the Holy Land for the first time. He writes that as a boy he thought the River Jordan was four thousand miles long and the Sea of Galilee sixty thousand miles in diameter. Yet when he took in those mythical places with his own eyes, he was shocked to find them so tiny compared to what he had imagined. While I never held the illusion that they were quite as grand as Twain did, I too was surprised to find the River Jordan traversable by foot and the Sea of Galilee more like what we Americans would call a lake. The Galilee region was small and unimpressive; it seemed so ordinary. "Is this it?" was the question I kept asking. I thought that Jesus' neighborhood would have been a little more special.

When I returned from the Holy Land, I went to work for the remainder of the summer at the Jesuit Family Retreat Program in Blue Ridge Summit, Pennsylvania. This program is a ministry of the Jesuits in the Maryland Province, and every summer they invite poor, inner-city families to come to the mountains for a week of prayer and vacation. The retreat center is only a short walk from the Maryland border and lies between the Civil War battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg. Its hills and valleys are dotted by small towns and their idyllic Main Streets all proudly display American flags. It seems worlds away from the sophistication and hurried pace of major city life, though Baltimore and Washington DC are only a short drive away.

Almost immediately upon my arrival in this backwater part of Pennsylvania I began to identify it with the Galilee region in Israel. If I left the retreat center to shop at Wal-Mart or to get ice cream with other staff members, I would think to myself that Jesus lived in each of the towns that we passed through. "Jesus lives here," I'd say to myself, "Jesus lives in this little one-stop-light town."

We Christians believe that Jesus is present with all people in all places, of course. I found myself thinking, however, that Jesus was especially there, living with those simple folks in small-town America as he lived two millennia ago with his friends and neighbors in small-town Galilee. Places like rural Pennsylvania are not as exciting as cosmopolitan metropolises, yet neither was Bethsaida or Capernaum when compared to a place like Jerusalem. What the Holy Land taught me was that Jesus can be found just as readily in the ordinary and overlooked parts of the world as he can be found anywhere else. I only needed to have my eyes opened to see that all places—even those like Blue Ridge Summit, Pennsylvania—are holy with a God who dwells among us. ■



Michael Singhurse, SJ

Praying at the site of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, arguably the holiest site in the Christian world, deepened my sense of being connected to the life of Christ. The most remarkably moving part of this experience was finding myself captivated by the other people visiting these holy places. Their devotion, their almost tangible expressions of faith, gave me a tremendous sense of the unity we share as Christians. Although different in many ways, we were one in our love for Jesus and in our desire to follow him not only to Jerusalem but to the ends of the earth.



Richard Beebe, SJ

As I prayed morning and evening prayer overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem, the words of the psalmist jumped out at me. I was awed and overwhelmed at every reference to those people and events that took place in this spot. Of Jerusalem, David, the Temple, the City of Zion, and so many others. These words were opened up to me in an indescribable way. They have stopped being words on a page and have become part of who I am.

The experience of following in the footsteps of Jesus, St. Paul, and St. Ignatius to Jerusalem and encountering the faith and love that guided their journeys has given me tremendous consolation as I continue my own journey as a Jesuit, as a companion of Jesus. My relationship with the man who Jesus was has deepened. My desire to follow him, to devote my life and all that I have to share in his mission has been immeasurably strengthened. ■

As I reflect on my experiences in Jerusalem, the word *incarnation* keeps leaping forward. Jerusalem is dripping with humanity, it's busy, it's crowded, it's got Islamic holy sites built on top of Christian holy sites built on top of Jewish holy sites. People are everywhere, trying to sell their wares, offering tours, begging for money, announcing the end of the world. I wouldn't exactly describe it as a "quiet" place. Amidst this bustle—more accurately through and by means of this bustle—God spoke to me during my time in the Holy Land. The teeming mass of humanity and the interaction and juxtaposition of the life of Jesus in the middle of all the bustle heightened my sensitivity and appreciation of incarnation. My time there is best described as a palpable experience of the mystery and wonder of incarnation.



Eric Sundrup, SJ

While at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, I visited the grotto and the altar that mark the spot where Jesus is said to have been born. The floor beneath the altar is made of white marble and right in the middle of it is a 14-pointed silver star surrounded by a Latin inscription that in English reads, "Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary."

The center of the star is hollow, as though something was shot through or bored into that spot. As I touched the star and reflected on that church and the events that took place beneath its foundations over 2,000 years ago, I was struck by the image and the feeling of God boring right into the heart of everything. The Church of the Nativity is one cluttered, hectic little chapel. Yet even amongst the clutter and the noise and the tourists, I was struck by a sense that this is in fact a holy place. All too often I believe that God can't or won't deal with me in my hectic, unfinished, sinful state. But that is absolutely contrary to the story of Jesus and everything I've been taught. Yet, this little star reminds me that when God became man, the Trinity jumped right into the middle of everything, boring right to the core, meeting the world where it was, throwing itself into our frenzied, hectic, and sinful world with a reckless abandon that can only be described as love.

That's the image that stays with me and guides my formations as a Jesuit—God, who is love, bores right to the core of everything. Bethlehem reminds me that God doesn't wait for us to get it all together, he jumps into the middle of our lives, meets us where we are, and invites us into deeper meaning. ■

Our visit to Nazareth was incredibly stimulating. I wanted with all my senses to grasp the tangibility of this town where Jesus lived and where Our Lady received the word of God. As we walked around, I would take off my sandals and really dig my feet into the earth, into this place where Christ grew up. I would find myself touching stones and grasping at things to feel as much a part of this place as I could. Later, visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem and touching a remnant of a building in which Jesus had been was another incredibly moving experience and was almost too much at times. This entire trip was amazing and has really enriched my prayer life. But just as St. Ignatius didn't stay there, we are not staying there. Jerusalem is a place we visit to see how it was and to walk the roads that Christ traveled. But then we go off to the rest of the world because that's where we are called. As was said to St. Ignatius: "let Rome be your Jerusalem." For me that would be, "let the Bronx be your Jerusalem." ■



Jacob Martin, SJ

Each day I spent a few hours at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City. Though I found God very easily in periods of private prayer at the place of the Crucifixion and at the Tomb of Christ, I could also feel God's presence in the variety of liturgies and processions held every day within the church. Encountering pilgrims from many parts of the world—Roman Catholics from Italy and the Philippines, Orthodox Christians from Ethiopia, Greece and Russia, Copts, Armenians and many others—I observed some of the countless ways in which Christ makes himself present in the lives of contemporary believers. In the process, I came to a deeper appreciation of Christ's call to "go and make disciples of all nations."



Joseph Koczera, SJ

My time in Jerusalem was also a great experience of fellowship with my brother Jesuits. Praying together with my novitiate classmates, I felt renewed in the sense of spiritual companionship that makes us "friends in the Lord." I am deeply grateful to the Society and the benefactors of the province for making this experience possible. As I return to studies and ministry in the United States, I hope that I will have the opportunity to share the gifts and graces of my experience in Jerusalem with God's people. ■



Fr. Jim Collins, SJ, celebrates mass with his fellow Jesuits at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Pictured here are Jim Shea, Jake Martin, and Michael Conley.

# Prayer and Reflection in the Lenten Season

SAVE THE DATE

Sunday, **February 22**, **Scottsdale, Arizona**

Ash Wednesday, **February 25**, **Naples, Florida**

Sunday, **March 1**, **Palm Beach, Florida**

*Pat McGrath, SJ, is the provincial assistant for secondary education for the Chicago Province.*



Pat McGrath, SJ

Sunday, **March 8**, **Cincinnati**

*Bill Verbryke, SJ, is director of novices for the Chicago and Detroit Provinces.*



Bill Verbryke, SJ

Sunday, **March 22**, **Chicago**

*Jim Gartland, SJ, is the president of Cristo Rey Jesuit High School.*



Jim Gartland, SJ

For more information or to receive an invitation, please contact Eileen Meehan at 800-922-5327 or [Eileen@jesuits-chi.org](mailto:Eileen@jesuits-chi.org).

*Partners* is published three times a year by the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus for its members and their families and friends, and numerous benefactors. To request a complimentary subscription, please call 800-922-5327 or e-mail

[partners@jesuits-chi.org](mailto:partners@jesuits-chi.org).