

Connecting to Christ

by Tim Drake

Holy Land pilgrimage brings the Bible to life for Legatus members

While there was peace in the Middle East when Legatus members signed up for an Oct. 8-18 Holy Land pilgrimage, the news in September was saturated with stories of fighting in Gaza. Still, the trip went on.

The group of 41 included Legatus founder Tom Monaghan, as well as executive director John Hunt. It was Steve Ray's third time leading a Legatus Holy Land pilgrimage. Father Shane Tharp of Chickasha, Okla., served as the spiritual director.

"I told them to trust me," said Ray, who has traveled to the Holy Land more than 150 times. "This wasn't my first rodeo."

Up-close access

The group saw all the major holy sites and experienced many perks along the way. They swam in the Sea of Galilee, renewed their baptismal vows in the Jordan, and renewed their wedding vows at Cana. They met the bishop of Jerusalem, and four Knights of the Holy Sepulchre obtained their pilgrimage shells at that site. Pilgrims also participated in an afternoon Bible study with Fr. Tharp, discussing the various sites and Bible passages of the day.

Steve Peroutka, a member of Legatus' Baltimore Chapter, said he was inspired to attend the pilgrimage with his wife Debbie after having attended two previous Legatus trips to Ireland and Italy.

"Every one of us, to a man, was told by others 'don't go,'" said Peroutka regarding safety concerns. "Those who did go were rewarded for their courage. Instead of 50 buses at each of the holy sites, there were only five, so we were able to get up close and personal to see these places."



Steve and Janet Ray (center, sitting), together with Legatus pilgrims, pose with the Jerusalem Auxiliary Bishop William Hanna Shomali

Larry Eagan of the Western Massachusetts Chapter first learned of the pilgrimage at the 2014 Legatus Summit in Orlando.

"Steve Ray made an appealing case for it," said Eagan. "When I spoke with him afterwards, he told me it would be one of the nicest trips he had ever done. He sold me on the quality and the TLC."



Notre Dame Center, the Vatican-owned hotel where Legatus members stayed in Jerusalem

Eagan attended the pilgrimage with his wife, Mary Anne. The highlight for Eagan was Gethsemane.

"We were there after Mass one morning and it was very tranquil," he said. "Seeing the rock where Jesus prayed and sweat blood was very emotional, but seeing the living olive trees that were 2,000 years old, more than any other site, made me connect to the time of Christ."

Footsteps of Christ

The pilgrims had high praise for their leaders: pilgrimage directors Steve and Janet Ray, Fr. Shane, and Amer Shedareh, a Catholic guide from Nazareth.

"We didn't know anyone else, but enjoyed getting to know a group of like-minded people," said Eagan. "That made the event even better. It was a pilgrimage during the day, with celebrations of the day's events at night. There was great camaraderie and fun."

"It was fabulous because the people you're traveling with are such faithful people," added Debbie Peroutka. "I also enjoyed getting to know Tom Monaghan. He's always been this man who did so many things, but spending 10 days with him was pretty neat. He is an inspiration with what he's done with his faith and for other people."

Eagan said that the Gospel came alive for him while visiting Caesarea Philippi, where Christ said that he would build his Church upon the rock of Peter. "The setting and the background of this was a real eye-opener. I had no idea that it was such a pagan site."

"To be there and know that you *are* there — you have no doubt that this was the place," explained Steve Peroutka. "These sites are documented enough. We saw where Jesus ran around as a child, and where he lived with Peter. Now, when I hear a Gospel passage I can call to mind where it happened."

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