

Band of brothers

By Christopher Gunty editor@CatholicReview.org

As a former seminarian and a “professional Catholic” who has worked for the church for nearly 30 years, I’ve gotten to know a lot of priests - and bishops - personally. This past week is not the even the first time I have traveled with a group of priests and a bishop on pilgrimage. However, this pilgrimage has given me a great opportunity to get to know almost two dozen priests from the Archdiocese of Baltimore, as well as a couple from nearby arch/dioceses. It’s been a great privilege. One thing I know is that most priests whom I have encountered in my years are genuinely good men who want first and foremost to serve the Lord and his people. Certainly there are some who don’t fulfill that call well. That’s the case in any vocation or avocation. Look around your workplace and you’ll see some people who love their job and do it well, and others who don’t do it well. What I have found is that most priests are happy and fulfilled in their vocations and studies bear that out, I have been impressed this past week by several things about these men. • First, they are men of prayer. They take this pilgrimage seriously, listening well to the homilies and reflections of Bishop Denis J. Madden, auxiliary of Baltimore and their “retreat leader.” Often they take time for private prayer, either reading Scripture or the “office,” the Liturgy of the Hours that priests pray each day (a discipline of prayers for morning, midday and evening that lay people are encouraged to adopt as well).



Baltimore priests

At a Mass Oct. 18 near Tabgha, the site where Jesus fed the multitude with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, Bishop Madden reflected on the reading from

the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus appointed 72 disciples to go out ahead of him two by two. He told them they are part of the “band of 72.” “We have the privilege of sharing the Gospel message,” not necessarily with the intent of converting people, but to have some influence on society and to improve society. “We are the new 72. The Scriptures will come alive for the people we meet” the bishop said. • Second observation: These priests care for each other. Some of the group are not as young as they used to be and take a little extra time getting around, especially since some of the sites we have visited have a lot of uneven steps. The priests have been kind and helpful in their assistance to their fellow priest, ensuring that he has sure footing. One of the priests took ill on the journey, and all expressed their concern for him, and did all they could to make sure he was comfortable. It seems to be more than common courtesy, but genuine fraternal compassion. I have three brothers (and six sisters), and though my brothers and I all live in different states, we are still close. What amazes me is that these men are not related by blood, yet by their actions they show they love each other in the same ways that blood brothers do. The “priestly fraternity” is a real thing, and it benefits the physical, mental and spiritual health of our priests. • Another thing that’s obvious: priests enjoy being together. Sure, they like to “talk shop” about liturgical matters, parish ministry and the issues facing the church. But they also just enjoy being together. They chat, they smile, they sing, they joke, they laugh. Yes, they laugh well, and they laugh often.



Evening Prayer in the church at the site of the Transfiguration. (Catholic Review photo | Christopher Gunty)

And they praise God, often. It’s a part of their conversation, and a regular part of who they are and part of their day. Joining this pilgrimage has been uplifting for me, too. To receive the Eucharist at the Tomb of the Holy Sepulcher, to walk the Way of the Cross, to pray Evening Prayer at Mount Tabor, the site of the Transfiguration,

have been new experiences for me, and they have touched my heart forever. At Mount Tabor today, I thought, as the disciples did, “It is good for us to be here.” The journey - in the Holy Land and when we return - continues. Tiberius, Israel - October 19, 2010