

Shall we gather at the river?

By Christopher Gunty *The Catholic Review*

Saturday, on the road from Jerusalem and Jericho in Israel to Petra, in Jordan, our intrepid pilgrims stopped by the Jordan River and the place where John the Baptist is believed to have baptized our Lord. The site where the actual baptism probably took place has the ruins of three Byzantine churches dating back over the centuries. But no water there. We were told that the river was much wider and the area more verdant 2,000 years ago. The river is now a bit of a walk away. Some new churches either are being built in the area or have been completed recently, including a Greek Orthodox church that opened in 2003. Jordan is clearly hoping the site becomes a major pilgrimage destination, with construction under way on a convention and visitors center due to be completed by the end of this year. The Jordan River now winds its way near the original baptism site, and the bells of the Greek Orthodox church greeted our group just as we walked the last part of the trail to the stairs that lead down to a place for pilgrims to access the river. At this point, the river is not more than 20 feet wide, and the fresh water doesn't seem to be flowing very quickly, at least not at this time of the year. Visitors have the option to go down a few steps, right to the water level, and dip in their hand, or their feet. You can fill a bottle with water from the river, and many do (maybe that's why the river isn't as wide as it used to be).



Father Martin Burnham blesses himself with water from the Jordan River near the site where John baptized Jesus. (Catholic Review photo | Christopher Gunty)

Priests in our group took a chance to dip in their hands and bless themselves. Some coated their whole head with the water – from the same source that baptized our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 3:13-17, Mk 1:9-11, Lk 3:21-22 and Jn 1:29-34). Many took some water back and at least one plans to bless it in time for baptisms at the next Easter Vigil. I blessed myself with the river water, and took the opportunity to say a prayer for three people important to me. No dove came down, no voice from the sky proclaimed the news: “This is my beloved son, in him I am well pleased.” But Bill,

Amy and Tim are my children, and like Jesus' Father, I, too, am well pleased with mine. Many blessings on you, kiddos. -