

# We will visit the sites where these words were spoken

JERUSALEM – No matter where you are in Israel, from any compass point, if you go to Jerusalem, you “go up” to Jerusalem because it is in the Judean hills, the guide told a group of pilgrim priests from the Archdiocese of Baltimore upon their bus headed toward the city that is sacred to the three monotheistic faiths. And so began Oct. 12 the pilgrimage led by Bishop Denis Madden, auxiliary of Baltimore, after an 11-hour direct flight from Philadelphia to Tel Aviv. The bishop is accompanied by 21 priests from the archdiocese, plus one each from the neighboring Archdiocese of Washington and Diocese of Wilmington, Del. The only event on the itinerary for the first day was Mass at the Pontifical Institute Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, a retreat center and residence just across from the walls of the old city, owned by the Vatican and run under the auspices of the Legionaries of Christ. Bishop Madden was the principle celebrant for the regular daily Mass in English in the center’s Our Lady of Peace Chapel, and the priests in the group concelebrated. In addition to the Baltimore group, about 40 people, including a small group from Malawi, prayed and sang in the liturgy, their voices echoing clearly in the church that was built in the late 19th century. The bishop said the Mass’ commemoration on the local calendar of the Feast of St. Dismas – the good thief, who tradition says hung on Jesus’ right (though he was never named in the Gospels) – bodes well for the pilgrimage since the next day the pilgrims would be walking the footsteps of Jesus on the Way of the Cross and Calvary. “We will visit the sites ... tomorrow where these words were spoken to this saint,” Bishop Madden said, referring to the line from Luke 23: “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” The bishop, who lived in the region for nine years when he worked with the pontifical mission for the Near East, said he felt like every day was a pilgrimage while he was here. He quoted from Paul Elie’s book, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage” to define a pilgrimage:

*“A pilgrimage is a journey undertaken in light of a story. A great event has happened; the pilgrim hears the reports and goes in search of the evidence, aspiring to be an eyewitness. The pilgrim seeks not only to confirm the experience*

*of others firsthand but to be changed by the experience. "Pilgrims often make the journey in company, but each must be changed individually; they must see for themselves, each with his or her own eyes. And as they return to ordinary life the pilgrims must tell others what they saw, recasting the story in their own terms."*

[Coincidentally, that's how we journalists often look at our craft – minus the spiritual aspect, and without necessarily being changed by the experience. But as a *Catholic* journalist, I can tell you that my reporting has often taken me places where I have been an eyewitness to religious events, confirming the spiritual experience of others, returning to ordinary life and telling the story of what I saw. I hope that what I have seen and heard has helped people grow in spirituality along the way. I'm often on a pilgrimage, too, I guess.] Bishop Madden reminded the congregation at Notre Dame that we often get so caught up in our own lives that we forget the newness of the Gospel. As pilgrims, these priests have come across the ocean to express publicly their belief in God and in Jesus. "We've come here to be inspired and to set our lives straight," the bishop said. "God will surely speak to us." Some of the priests in the group have visited the Holy Land before, a few of them multiple times. For some, including your intrepid blogger, this is their first visit. We're all looking for the inspiration that comes with walking where Christ and the first disciples walked, with seeing the places that we hear proclaimed about in the readings at Mass. We don't need to put our hands in Christ's side to believe, as Thomas did. But to understand the context of the place will help to break open the Scriptures. We sang Sr. Suzanne Toolan's "I Am the Bread of Life" as our Communion song for the first Mass of the pilgrimage, and as some 70 voices harmonized and echoed off the acoustically vibrant stone walls of the chapel the refrain "And I will raise you up, and I will raise you up on the last day," I was moved to think that tomorrow, we will see Calvary, where Jesus died, and the tomb, where its emptiness showed how his Resurrection conquered sin for all time. Yes, truly, he will raise us up, on the last day. The journey begins.