



Catenian Pilgrimage to The Holy Land

By Anthony Phillips, Ealing and Chiswick Circles

Whilst contacting 'lastminute.com' and asking for a booking to The Holy Land might work, a pilgrimage for an unspecified number of Catenians needs a lot more planning. It was some two years ago that Grand President Joe McNally asked Grand Council to consider a pilgrimage to The Holy Land. As an Association the last visit was in the 1930s, and other Pilgrimages had been to Rome and Walsingham. Grand Council agreed and the idea was passed to the Liaison Work Group to explore the means to put the idea into reality.

The Group, under Director of Province 16 Gerry Devine, started to consider several options and with the expertise of Martin Madden, Leicester South Circle, the practical aspects started to come into shape. One of the first considerations was to decide on how many might become pilgrims. Would Catenians as usual leave matters to the last minute to book or would they come in number relatively early?

We were also fortunate that we could use the knowledge of the Knights of The Holy Sepulchre, who have organised several such pilgrimages to The Holy Land. Michael Whelan, Kenilworth Circle, was the then Lieutenant of the Order. They use Tangney Tours, John Tangney of Bromley Circle, as their main travel advisor and they work closely with Laila Tours in Bethlehem. And so some flesh started to cover the bare bones.

At the 2009 Conference, enough information was in place for the Pilgrimage to be formally launched. The basic itinerary would include flights from the UK direct to Tel Aviv, Ben Gurion airport, coach transfer to Jerusalem and several nights there, coach transfer to Bethlehem and some nights there, then moving north by coach to Galilee and staying in a hotel for some nights and finally return to Tel Aviv and flights home.

Over the next six months the numbers started to grow and finally reached the total of 200. Flights were arranged from Manchester and Heathrow, and, with just one hiccup when BMI withdrew from the route, main travel using BA, El Al and Jet2 was organised. These flights arrived at Ben Gurion at different times, so a number of coaches were needed to transfer us to Jerusalem. 200 neatly fits into four coaches and made some organisation details a little easier. The fact that, when we received our list of Pilgrims, it was 'issue 17', reflected the many changes that became necessary over time.



The coaches, decked in different colours, await the pilgrims

With the final itinerary in place a couple of mailings arrived at homes, including a booklet of all readings and Mass details, and a backpack for use, name tags, labels etc. The backpacks were in five different colours, Blue, Red, Green and Beige, with Yellow for clergy and organisers, to make matters easier when we were in The Holy Land. One mailing invited all to take a more active part in the Pilgrimage by volunteering to be Readers, Organist, Collectors, Offertory Procession etc.

The final mail showed details of all pilgrims, and who was doing various duties. All was now in place. Michael Whelan and, I am sure, Norah, had burnt the midnight oil with all the preparation, John Tangney had all travel arrangements in place and Laila Tours had arranged all the Hotel accommodation and coaches and with Michael, the main itinerary around Israel and The Palestine Territory. We learnt that Michael had made several journeys in advance to the various places to ensure all was well.

And so we arrived, and the first morning we were soon split into the four groups and we identified our spiritual Director, Bishop John of Hallam, and four Spiritual Leaders Fathers Gus, Martin, Joe and John and also Deacon Philip. With so many, the Group became the focus of our Pilgrimage. We started to 'gel' as a unit and got to know one another better. The social side was also great, so much so that we almost ran one hotel dry, drinking more in one night than the hotel normally provides in six months. Moving four Groups around was quite a task especially in the confines of Jerusalem, but the coloured pack that all carried made matters a lot easier and the back markers had a relatively easy task to ensure all kept up with the four excellent guides. Their extensive knowledge was evident and they gave us valuable information at each stopping point, which was backed up by reflections from the clergy.



Bishop John celebrates Mass in the Church of All Nations, Gethsemane

The readings in the book were all relevant to the places we visited, and Bishop John and our priests led the spiritual side with great effect considering the fact that they had not visited before. A large number took part in the readings, processions, as Eucharistic ministers so that as many as possible could contribute during the Pilgrimage. Special mention of John O'Shea (London Central) the sole organist. A more tangible contribution came in the collections at each place so that we could support the churches and Holy Places.

Despite many anxiously watching the news to see when flights might be resumed, and with Bishop John and John Tangney sidelined as they could not get home as planned, we did all return on time. The Pilgrimage was a great

success and could not have been so but for the extensive work done prior to and during the Pilgrimage, so a special thanks to Michael and Norah, John, Gill and their team at Tangney Tours, Laila and her guides and coach drivers, resplendent in their colour coordinated uniforms, and of course the Pilgrims.



Laila Asfoura with Philomena and Grand President Joe McNally