

PROLOGUE

A pilgrimage for me is like time-travel -- a journey to a distant space and time, where the past comes to life within the imagination of the mind. Imagine going back to Greece when it was developing into the foundation of our western democracy, and visualize walking with and listening to the Greek philosophers in the halls and temples of wisdom. Athens, Greece, the home of Athena, goddess of wisdom, is the best springboard into the world of the mind, which recreates the sacred Parthenon on the mighty Acropolis in all the majesty that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.



Every step you take on the pilgrimage path ascends either towards a transformative experience similar to the Eleusinian Mysteries or to a rebirth based on the Mysteries of the Gospel that Apostle Paul preached at the Areopagus. It's a journey that lifts the soul of the pilgrim to new heights of awareness and understanding.

The pilgrim follows in the footsteps of the ancient masters in order to transcend the ordinary and to enter into an extraordinary sacred space where the divine becomes real. The stone sculptures, temples and artistic architectural features speak of a beauty created by a vision of an archetypal ideal that lifts the human spirit into an ecstatic and contemplative state of mind. It's as if the stone figures that were carved from the aspiring mountains take on a life of their own and teach eternal truths and principles – if we only stop and listen to them. Each statue becomes, in essence, a “Sermon in Stone.” Each artistically created stone figure speaks volumes of words, thoughts and concepts about the outer and inner nature of Man.

The pilgrimage that I took this time was with Pilgrim Tours, and it began with a cruise on the Celestyal Olympia in the Mediterranean (“middle of the earth”) Sea. Sailing on the ancient sea made me think of the voyage that Odysseus took back home after the Trojan War, and it also made me think of the missionary journeys that Apostle Paul took as he embarked on the mission to bring the Christian gospel to the Greco-Roman world. This was, after all, a “traveling in the footsteps of St. Paul” trip, taking us to places that he traveled to and making us aware of what happened in those places. Some of the places, actually, were not where he walked or taught, but places that were important in the wider context of understanding the Greco-Roman world that he was a part of.

The first stop on the journey was at Mykonos, the island of the wind and windmills – the stone giants that stood as remnants of an ancient way of life. This was the stepping stone to the nearby sacred island of Delos, birthplace of the twins Apollo (god of the sun and light) and Artemis (the mother goddess); this was also a pilgrimage site of ancient days. However, visiting the expansive archaeological site was not part of the itinerary.

The second stop – Ephesus – was an archaeological site where the ancient Temple of Artemis (Diana) stood. Nothing remained of that seventh wonder of the world. However, the great theater where Apostle Paul was supposed to speak, but was prevented from doing so, still stood as a witness of that moment in biblical history when the Mother Goddess was prominent. The captivating story is full of dramatic suspense and intrigue, and is masterfully told in the 19th chapter of Acts.

Patmos, the island of the Apocalypse, was where the dramatic “unveiling” of the Book of Revelation was envisioned by the Apostle John in a natural cave. This revelation of hidden knowledge became the cornerstone of Christian futuristic thinking about the end of time and a better world to come. Patmos, the northernmost island in the Dodecanese (“twelve”) chain of islands, became the “Jerusalem of the Aegean Sea” in the 11th century when the fortified monastery of St. John was built.

Crete, the world-renowned island of the mythical Labyrinth and the Minotaur, was the center of the Minoan civilization, and visiting the archaeological site of the Palace of Knossos gave me a new appreciation of the Greek myth (half-truth, half-legend) that preserved the story of the rooms and corridors (labyrinth) and the sport of bull jumping (minotaur). There was more to the story, of course, such as the fact that the labyrinth was actually called “the house of the double-ax” (labrys), and that the minotaur (half-man, half-bull) was a metaphor with several meanings. The archaeological museum in Heraklion was where archaeological finds from Neolithic (6th millennium BC) to Roman times impressed me with awe and wonder.

Santorini, also known as Thera, was to me the island that made me wonder about the legendary “island of Atlantis” that Plato wrote about in his dialogues Timaeus and Critias. The cataclysmic volcanic eruption that shook the entire planet in the 15th century BC caused the round island to become a huge caldera. In spite of the volcano’s destructive power, new life on the island in the form of beautiful white buildings and scenic views of the caldera that opens into the sea is a sight to behold.

Ancient Corinth is the place where the Bible comes to life. This was the place where Apostle Paul was brought to the Bema (“Judgment Seat”) in the Forum and accused by the Jews of “worshipping God contrary to the law.” The story (Acts 18:1-18) is exceptional in that historical verification for the proconsul Gallio, who presided over the proceedings, was discovered through archaeological findings. Also, an inscription in stone with the name Erastus (Romans 16:23) on it gives the site value to biblical scholars.

Ancient Mycenae, although of no apparent biblical importance, is of great cultural and historical value in that it is associated with the legends of Homer – the Iliad and the

Odyssey – and its ruins are a remnant of the Mycenaean civilization that flourished in Greece from 1600 to 1200 BC. The cyclopean walls that surround the citadel, which were supposedly built by the legendary cyclops (“giants”), might testify to the statement in the Bible that says, “there were giants in the earth in those days.”

In Athens, the visit to the Parthenon atop the Acropolis is the highlight of any pilgrimage or tour. This was the place where the grand Panathenaic Procession from Elefsina – the start of the Eleusinian Mysteries about Demeter and Persephone, and the knowledge of overcoming the fear of death – ended. The entire frieze on the Parthenon depicted that mystical procession from Elefsina to Athens. The ancient temple of the virgin goddess of wisdom, Athena, was splendid even though parts of it were covered in scaffolding during a lengthy process of restoration. Nearby, a visit to the Areopagus (Mars Hill) is the delight of the biblical pilgrim whose goal is to stand where Apostle Paul stood and delivered his famous speech about the altar “To the Unknown God,” declaring that the known God was the One “in whom we live, and move, and have our being.” (Acts 17:16-34)

Rome, the Eternal City, is always the culmination of any pilgrimage. This was the culmination of Apostle Paul’s missionary journeys, and the place where tradition says he was beheaded as a martyr of the Christian faith. A visit to the catacombs reveals burial niches dug out of soft volcanic rock in underground tunnels where everyone was buried – the rich, the poor, the Christian, and the Gentile. A visit to the Forum reveals the ruins of an empire that had reached its peak and had fallen. A visit to the Colosseum reveals the immense structure that was built by slaves from the Roman war with the Jews, a structure that stood as a reminder of the glory of Rome. A visit to the city of Ostia Antica at the mouth of the Tiber River reveals how archaeology can resurrect a city from the ruins.

Rome, to the Bible scholar, is mostly the story of Apostle Paul bringing the Christian gospel from the east to the west, from Jerusalem to Rome. It’s as if the center of civilization and religion was taken from the Jewish and the Greek world and transplanted onto Roman soil. The monumental basilica that was built to honor the person and the movement was St. Paul’s Outside the Walls. The Corinthian columns that grace the exterior and the interior of the basilica speak of a time when the Church was facing reformations from outside forces and needed to establish itself as the Universal Religion.

That brings us to the end of our pilgrimage – Vatican City, where Roman Catholicism established itself as the Universal Religion. Here the stone statues from Greece and prominent places around the world, obelisks from the ancient civilization of Egypt, art works from various masters, and monuments glorifying various saints and doctors of the church – all are on display to show the world that various beliefs, cultures, and traditions have been amalgamated into a coherent whole. Here is a syncretism where you can see the Jewish Old Testament in Michelangelo’s painting of the Sistine Chapel, the Greek muses in the Hall of Muses, the classical statues of gods and

goddesses in the Round Hall, and the Christian St. Peter's basilica where the keys to the kingdom are held in the hands of St. Peter and the Church. It's all there in majestic glory, speaking volumes of "Sermons in Stone."

