

Fraser Italy and Greece Pilgrimage Travelogue

January 9 –22, 2024

Overview Comments

Pat and I joined 11 other Deacons and their wives for a special guided Pilgrimage to Italy and Greece. Our fellow Pilgrims: Keith/Lynn, Miguel/Maria, Vita/Ynes, Fred/Omi, Herbert/Guadelupe, Hector/Vilma, Dan/Terri, Terry/Patti, Lenny/Maureen, Brian, Roger H, Father Malachy; Photographer Shiraz; Guides Maurizio, Daniela, Antoinette, Alik; and drivers Sisto and George. Deacon Keith was a gifted tour leader and spiritual director who ensured a smooth journey for our challenging tour...not that we weren't the best group of travelers, but when there were problems, he dealt with them so we won't have to. Our group prayer time set the tone for each day. Father Malachy added a new dimension to our pilgrimage when he joined us in Greece...such a generous servant of God who shared his love of God and demonstrated his love for us.

Our Pilgrimage was a journey of Faith, but it was unique because of the amount of ground we covered to reach many places sacred to Catholics. I have a life time of stories for homilies, because I can now say, "I was there." In 14 days we visited: Atlanta-Frankfort-Rome-Assisi-Lanciano-San Giovanni Rotundo-Monte Sant'Angelo-Montecassino-Rome-Istanbul-Thessaloniki-Philippi-Kavala-Veria-Vergina-Kalambaka-Meteora-Athens-Corinth-Frankfort-Atlanta.

It was an arduous and sometimes uncomfortable trip that was always rewarding in unexpected ways. I recognized how important it was to be "out of my bubble" of comfort and familiar things at home, to experience people and places in different environments...it was the same when I visited Haiti five times. It was too intense for me to consider it to be a vacation. Over 12,000 miles in the air! Over 1,400 miles on the bus! 6 hotels in 14 days was challenging, and to me revealed how spoiled we are to be so well fed, housed and cared for (even if there were no wash cloths or tub mats...or you couldn't flush the paper down the toilet in Greece!)

I intentionally tried to "Be in the Moment" to maximize the spiritual and visiting experiences. It took me 6 days to fully transition from a mere trip to a true Pilgrimage as I learned to embrace my discomfort, fatigue, worries and information overload. On days 4 and 5 I dealt with a sinus infection that plugged my head and sapped my energy, but I rebounded on day 6 with decongestant from my medicine bag. Had a setback on day 10 that could have derailed the Pilgrimage for Pat and I...then "God's people" stepped up.

We experienced the span of Christian history:

- 9th century BC: Ancient Greece
- 6th Century BC: Ancient Phillpi Greece
- 4th Century BC - 1st Century BC: Roman Period Italy and Greece
- 1st Century: St. Peter and St. Paul Italy and Greece
- 2nd Century - 5th Century: Rome and Michael the Archangel Italy
- 6th Century: St. Benedict and St. Scholastica Italy
- 8th Century: First Eucharistic miracle at the Church of St. Longinus Italy
- 13th Century: St. Francis and St. Clare Italy
- 14th Century: Meteora monasteries Greece
- 20th Century: St. Padre Pio and Blessed Carlos Acutis Italy

It blew my mind when Maurizio told us that Christianity was nearly eradicated from Europe in the Middle Ages, the Dark Ages! Pat then told me about a book we own... How the Irish Saved Civilization "The book presents Western history from the collapse of the Roman Empire and the pivotal role played by members of the Catholic clergy at the time. A particular focus is placed upon Saint Patrick. The book details his early struggles

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through slavery, mirroring much of the content in The Confession of Saint Patrick. Initial portions of the book examine Ireland before the arrivals of Patrick and Saint Augustine of Canterbury. Then focus is placed upon Saint Columba, the monks he trained, and the monasteries he set up in the Hiberno-Scottish mission. These holy men "single-handedly re-founded European civilization throughout the continent."

BTW, Pat is Irish...she's little, but she's mighty...just saying.

I learned that Pilgrimages are for "Fit" people. My switch to a mostly plant-based diet in early 2023, losing weight and additional exercise we accomplished during the year proved to be game changers for us. The trip was arduous; 2 days in Rome peaked our walking at 35,000 steps...total for the 2 weeks was 106,000 steps. Eating "Plant-based" with some fish/eggs/cheese was easy in Italy and Greece. Fresh veggies, especially tomatoes, were amazing. Tap water in Italy was not an issue, but it was cautioned in Greece. Bottled water was plentiful throughout.

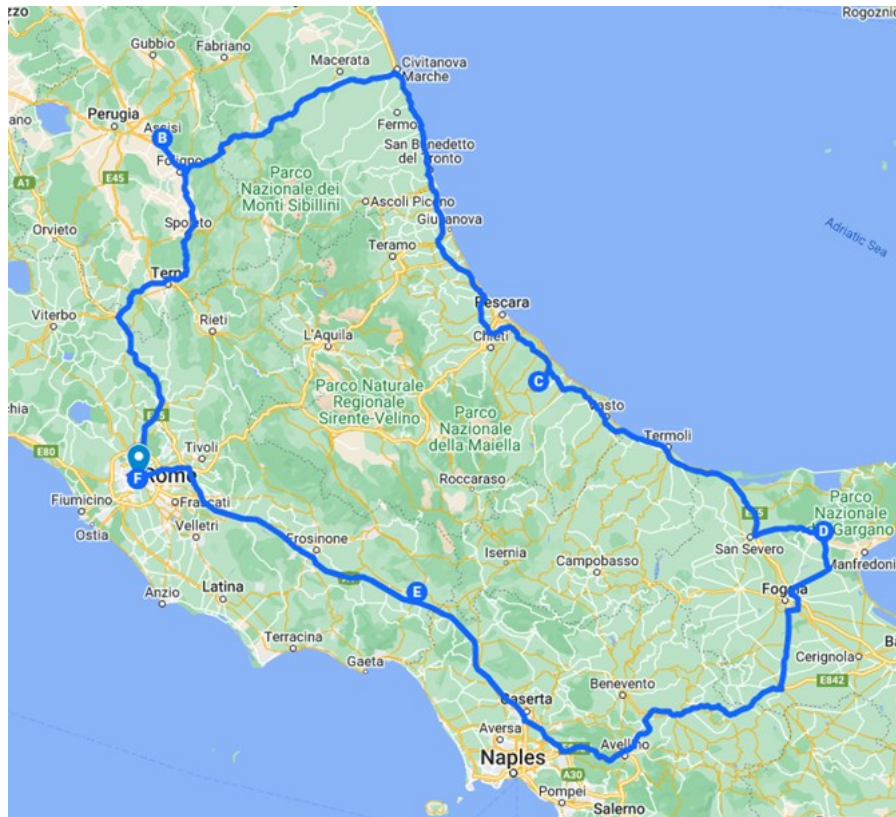
I am so impressed with the coordinator of our Pilgrimage, Good Shepherd Travel of Lantana, TX, owned and operated by Tony Abuaita. We experienced the great partnerships they have with top quality hotels, superb historian-guides and reliable transportation companies. And, their people were so attentive to details. We were so privileged to have on our trip Tony's brother-in-law Shiraz Al Rishmawi as our photographer and overall personified force/source of inspiration. When I learned that Shiraz and his family live in Bethlehem, including daughter Nya and son Jude, I couldn't help but think that Christmas 2023 didn't happen for them. After several days I told him that I needed to do something for him. I told him that I decided to write to my United States Senators and Representatives for them to help give the citizens of the Holy Land, of Palestine, a voice to explain what they really need today and in the long run. I feel we have failed them since Palestine was partitioned in 1948. Shiraz said, "invite them to Bethlehem!" I have no political dog in this fight, but now that I have a Palestinian Christian brother-from-another-mother. I will try to help by focusing on his need. It feels like such an inadequate effort that I will continue to think and pray about it. We can't wait to see Shiraz's photos.

We are SO GLAD we "Packed Light" (see attached Packing List) with each of us having only one standard-size suitcase (weighed 30lbs and 35lbs respectively.) My backpack proved to be versatile, and Pat's travel purse and small carryon were perfectly sized. Many people we saw had to deal with their larger/heavier/multiple bags.

Pilgrimages I swear shrinks your bladder...fortunately we always had breaks every 90 to 120 minutes.



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Tuesday, January 9: Atlanta to Frankfurt to Rome

Left home at 11:30AM for ParknFly Atlanta Hartsfield. Took shuttle from Domestic to International Terminal, checked-in with Lufthansa for flights to Rome.

- 4:50 pm Flight LH 445 to Frankfurt, Germany FRA. ARR: 7:45am (dur 8:55 hours)...less than 4 hours sleep....meal was good....in GAGALand
- 12:00pm Flight LH 232 to Rome FCO. ARR: 1:50pm (dur 1:50 hours)

Wednesday, January 10: Rome to Assisi

Welcomed to Rome and then transferred to Assisi.

- At Rome Airport FCO, collected our luggage, exited, and were greeted by our tour guide, Maurizio, and Shiraz, our muse. Long walk to the bus where our group went to Assisi (4-hour drive...began to learn how to sleep on the bus.)

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- 5:00pm Upon Arrival in Assisi, visited the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels where St. Francis spent most of life and is made up of two structures:



“The 9th Century “little church” Porziuncola where St. Francis founded his order of the Friar Minor (Franciscans) is behind the Basilica’s altar, and the Capella del Transito, the cell where St. Francis died Oct 4, 1226, is situated under the bay of the choir, against the right columns of the dome.”



This church is also the site of the 800-year-old creche celebration established by St. Francis “3 years before his death, to excite the inhabitants of Greccio to commemorate the nativity of the Infant Jesus with great devotion.”

- Attended Mass presided by Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, who is Pope Francis’ special envoy to Ukraine, and the US (he recently met with President Biden) and is said to potentially be the next Pope!! Gave a touching homily on how the “little church” within the larger Basilica is like the small holy places within us.



- Saw monument that marks “the historic meeting in 1219 during the 5th Crusade (of 9) between St. Francis and the Muslim Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil of Egypt. “In 13th century Europe, there was almost no knowledge of Islamic culture or religion, but rather only stereotypes of “the enemy.” Most voices in the Western Church...popes included...had been swept up in the fervor of the anti-Islamist Crusades which began in 1095. Indulgences were sold to fund the wars....a major abuse of power and of the Gospel! Control of Christian sites was not directly given to St. Francis by the Sultan. It was Robert d’Anjou, King of Naples, and his wife, Sancia of Majorca, who bought the Cenacle from the Sultan of Egypt in 1333 and gave it to the Franciscans. Later, in 1342, Pope Clement VI declared the Franciscans as the official custodians of the Holy Places in the name of the Catholic Church.”

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- Saw statue of St. Francis with the wolf of Gubbio in the rose garden. In this well-known legend, *“St. Francis goes to the Italian town of Gubbio, where a fierce wolf had been terrorizing the village and even killing some of the people, including children. During his visit to Gubbio, Francis goes out to meet the wolf. According to the story, when the wolf sees St. Francis, he comes charging at the saint with his mouth open, ready to attack. St. Francis immediately makes the sign of the cross over him and says, “Come here, Brother Wolf. I command you on behalf of Christ that you do no harm to me or to anyone.” As soon as St. Francis did this, “the fearsome wolf closed his mouth and stopped running; and once the command was given, it came meekly as a lamb, and threw itself at the feet of St. Francis.” Then St. Francis scolds Brother Wolf for destroying and killing the creatures of God. “The whole town is complaining about you,” Francis tells the wolf gently. “But I want to make peace between you and the people. And so I promise that I will have food given to you regularly, Brother Wolf, by the people of this town so that you will no longer suffer hunger. “Then the wolf, lifting his right paw, placed it in the hand of St. Francis. “Afterwards that same wolf lived in Gubbio for two years, and he tamely entered the houses, going from door to door, without doing any harm to anyone and without any being done to him; and he was kindly fed by the people....Finally after two years Brother Wolf died of old age, at which the citizens grieved very much.”*



- Pope Francis had a new Holy Family figurine commissioned for this year's creche....Joseph is holding Jesus and Mary is resting!!
- 7:00pm Checked-in at the 111 room Hotel Cenacolo, Assisi
- 7:30pm Dinner and overnight in Assisi.... Bone Tired! 10 hours sleep revived us.

Thursday, January 11: Assisi

- 8:00am breakfast at Hotel Cenacolo
- 9:00am Bus up hill to the center of Assisi

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Full day of touring the hometown of St. Francis with guide Daniela.

- *“St. Francis is the “Patron Saint of Animals and the Environment.” He is responsible for founding the Franciscan Order, and the inspiration for Pope Francis who chose his name in admiration of the Saint of Nature and Servant to the Poor. The atmosphere in Assisi has not changed since St. Francis began his ministry, in the early 13th-century. “*
- Visited the Basilica Santa Chiara that *“honors St. Clare, the foundress of the Poor Clare Sisters. This Saint followed the teachings of St. Francis very closely by also living a life of poverty and humility. “*



Viewed the original San Damiano cross, *“the large Romanesque rood cross that hung in an abandoned chapel near Assisi. While still in his early 20’s and seeking his place in the world, Francis of Assisi was praying before this cross when he heard the voice of God commanding him to “rebuild my church.” “Being in the moment” sitting before it, I saw what I never saw before: Jesus’ eyes were open...the Risen Christ was alive!”*



- Visited the Basilica of St. Francis *“the mother church of the Roman Catholic Order of Friars Minor Conventual where Saint Francis was born and died. It is a papal minor basilica and one of the most important places of Christian pilgrimage in Italy. The basilica, which was begun in 1228, is built into the side of a hill and comprises two churches (known as the Upper Church and the Lower Church) and a crypt, where the remains of the saint are interred. The interior of the Upper Church is an important early example of the Gothic style in Italy. The Upper and Lower Churches are decorated with frescoes by numerous late medieval painters.” Saw the cave where St. Francis prayed. He was a great man and Deacon...just saying.*

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- Visited Santa Maria Maggiore, Assisi where the tomb of Blessed Carlo Acutis. *“Before his death from leukemia in 2006, Acutis was an average teen with an above-average knack for computers. He put that knowledge to use by creating an online database of eucharistic miracles around the world.”* Carlos has an enormous following.



- 1:00pm break for lunch...cash only scrambled several of us to borrow Euros! We purchased a painting on a 5 lb. brick of the fresco of St. Francis giving away his cloak....the brick became heavier every day as we lugged it around Italy and Greece for 11 days!
- 4:30pm Mass at Basilica Santa Chiara
- 5:30pm Returned to the Hotel Cenacolo
- 7:00pm Dinner and overnight in Assisi

Friday, January 12: Assisi to Lanciaano to San Giovanni Rotondo

- 7:30am Breakfast and checked-out. Came down hard with a sinus infection...ached with no energy and was blurry-eyed with a stuffed up head.
- 9:00am Sat in the back of the bus as we headed to Lanciaano (4 hours). “Being in the moment” I embraced the situation during the Rosary...the Spanish parts were melodious and wrapped me in comfort.



- 1:00pm break for lunch in Lanciaano at “Al Vecchi Saponi” (to old flavors) a tiny stone “cave” of a family restaurant. Reminded us of our crowded family dinners. Could see Mama cooking ...good bread served in a white bag...Papa and daughter and special-needs son were right there working. Antipasto and gnocchi pasta were delish. Bathroom was so bad it was good! Only dim light from a window and I never found the foot pedal to turn on the water spout. Obviously, they were focused on hospitality and food with their limited resources. “Being in the moment,” we felt the love!!

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- Visited the Church of Sts. Longinus and Domitian, the site of the first Eucharistic Miracle that occurred in the 8th Century. *“At the time of the Miracle, there was a Basilian monk who struggled with the belief in the real presence of Jesus in our lives. While celebrating Mass, no sooner had he pronounced the words of the consecration than the host was transformed into human heart flesh and the wine into human blood”....* In 1970 scientific analysis verified the relics were human origin. It’s a matter of Faith...you decide what’s true.
- 5:00pm Traveled to San Giovanni Rotondo, the hometown of Saint Padre Pio.
- 7:30pm Checked-in to Hotel Gran Paradiso
- 8:00pm dinner and overnight at Hotel Gran Paradiso San Giovanni Rotondo

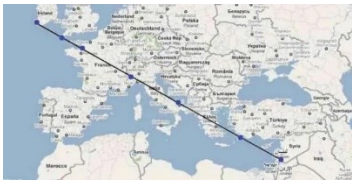
Saturday, January 13: San Giovanni Rotondo, Monte Sant’Angelo, Grotto of Michael the Archangel

- 8:00am Breakfast...I went back to bed and slept until 1:00pm
- 9:30am We missed hiking up and down hundreds of stairs to Mass at the tomb of St. Pio in the Church of Our Lady of Grace (Santa Maria delle Grazie).
 - After Mass, our group had the opportunity to tour the St. Mary of the Graces sanctuary, view incorrupt body of Padre Pio (though mummified), view the crucifix, in front of which St. Pio received the stigmata and see the confessional from where St. Pio spent hours listening to confessions.



- 1:30pm Pat and I had lunch at the Hotel’s Sale de Pepe (salt and pepper). Stuffed eggplant was excellent! They had an extensive list of grappa...only 5 Euros a shot.
- 2:00pm We missed traveling by bus through the Gargano Peninsula to the Sanctuary of Monte Sant’Angelo, the oldest shrine in Western Europe dedicated to this archangel. Here in the 5th Century St. Michael appeared to the Bishop of Sipontum to assure him that his diocese would not be annihilated as he feared.
 - Heard about a “stone relic” of St. Michael the Archangel. It is a white stone from the grotto at the Shrine of Saint Michael the Archangel in Monte Sant’Angelo, Gargano, Italy. I haven’t gotten my head around it...He’s called a saint but, I thought relics are from human saints. Maybe it’s a 2nd class relic...”anything directly related to or used by the saint during his or her life.” It’s a matter of Faith...you decide.

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- Learned about 7-site “Line of St. Michael.” *“It is surprising how well these sanctuaries are, in fact, aligned. The details of such alignment are also astonishing: the three most important sites, Mont Saint Michel in France; the Sacra of San Miguel in Val de Susa; and the Sanctuary of Monte Sant’Angelo in the Gargano are all the same distance one from the other. Some say this is a reminder from the Holy Archangel: the faithful are expected to be righteous, walking the straight path.”*
 1. *SKELLIG MICHAEL: The line starts in Ireland, on a desert island, where Archangel Michael would have appeared to Saint Patrick, to help him liberate that country from the devil.*
 2. *ST. MICHAEL’S MOUNT: An English Cornish islet which at low tide joins the mainland. Here, St. Michael is said to have spoken to a group of fishermen*
 3. *MONT SAINT MICHEL: The sacred line then goes on to France, on another famous Island, in Mont Saint-Michel, also one of the places in which Saint Michael has appeared.*
 4. *SACRA DI SAN MICHELE: About 1000 kilometers away, in Val de Susa, France the fourth sanctuary arises*
 5. *SANTUARIO DI SAN MICHELE ARCHANGELO: Moving another thousand kilometers in a straight line, one reaches Puglia, where an inaccessible cavern has become a sacred place; the Sanctuary of Saint Michael. Its story goes back to the year 490, when St. Michael appeared to Bishop San Lorenzo Maiorano.*
 6. *SYMI’S MONASTERY: From Italy, the archangel’s footprints reach the sixth sanctuary. This one is in Greece, on the island of Symi. This monastery houses a three-meter-high statue of the Archangel, one of the largest in the world*
 7. *MOUNT CARMEL MONASTERY: The Sacred Line ends in Israel, at Mount Carmel Monastery, in Haifa. This place has been revered since antiquity, and its construction as Christian and Catholic sanctuary dates back to the 12th century.”*
- 7:00pm Dinner and overnight at Hotel Gran Paradiso in San Giovanni Rotondo

Sunday, January 14: San Giovanni Rotondo to Montecassino to Rome

- 7:00am Breakfast and checked-out....I was back in the “land of the living” feeling much better.
- 8:00am After breakfast we transferred by bus to Montecassino. The 5 hour bus ride was scenic, as we passed through the Roman countryside that is known for its villas and vineyards. Throughout this bus ride, our tour guide Maurizio shared commentary regarding the spiritual, historical, and cultural aspects of Italy.

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- Visited the Montecassino Benedictine Abbey, the first and still principal monastery of the Benedictine Order. Founded by Saint Benedict around 530 A.D, on top of a mountain with a winding road and terrifying drop-offs! Plain on the outside but HUGE! Magnificent on the inside. Room after room of intricate marble inlays from around the Mediterranean represent the diversity of Christians all over the world. All Benedictines come here to study. Was completely restored after WWII with a portion of the Marshal Plan's \$15B funding. Proud to be an American!
- "Being in the moment," I embraced my discomfort, fatigue, worries and information overload. I finally was on a Pilgrimage!
- 4:30pm We boarded the bus for 2:30 hour drive to Rome
- 7:00pm checked-in at 179 room Star Hotel Michelangelo, dinner and overnight

Monday, January 15: Rome: Appian Way, Catacombs, Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, Archbasilica of St. John Lateran, St. Mary Major Basilica, Basilica of Sanra Croce in Gerusalemme, and "a walk through Rome"

- 7:00am Breakfast.



- 8:00am We began the short journey to the Appian Way, the earliest road of Ancient Rome. We passed the Aurelian Walls built in 275AD to enclose the 7 hills of Rome, past the Porta San Sebastiano gates through the wall, past Domine Quo Vadis Chapel where St Peter had a vision of Christ. Visited the catacombs of St. Callixtus the official cemetery of the Church of Rome in the 3rd century AD. Around half a million Christians were buried here, among them many martyrs and 16 popes. It is part of a cemeterial complex which occupies an area of 90 acres, with a network of galleries about 12 miles long, in four levels, more than twenty meters deep.

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- Visited the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. Originally founded by Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century, this Basilica is the burial place of Saint Paul the Apostle and the chains used to bind him while in prison in Rome. Viewed the mosaic “paintings” of all the Popes...there was space for the next Pope beside Pope Francis.



- Drove in the rain past the Coliseum where NO Christians were martyred! Christians died at Circus Maximus and the other Circus owned by the same family who owned the Coliseum, what is now known as Piazza Navona. Drove past the tallest obelisk in Rome, the Lateran obelisk dated to be in Rome from 357 and erected here in 1588... Rome is the city with the most ancient obelisks in the world, with 13...8 from Ancient Egypt and 5 from Ancient Roman Egypt.



- Visited The Archbasilica of St. John Lateran. *“This 4th century basilica, built by Rome’s first Christian Emperor Constantine I, is the oldest and most highly ranked basilica in Rome. The altar contains the table that is said to have been used by Jesus and his Apostles for the Last Supper. This Basilica has relics of Peter and Paul, is where Pope Francis was installed as Bishop of Rome, and where he officiates as the Bishop of Rome.”* Mosaic floors leading to the altar are in a serpentine pattern: *“God’s ways are not our ways”*

The day before our visit, the building was closed. Pope Francis hosted his local Bishops and Cardinal for a meeting regarding his recent decision to permit blessing of gay couples...I had to smile! What a leader!

We crossed the street to visit the Holy Staircase which are *“encased in wooden stair that can only be used by crawling on your knees. Tradition has it that this staircase is from Pontius Pilate’s palace of Jerusalem during the time of Jesus. The Staircase was brought to Rome by St. Helen in the 4th century.”*

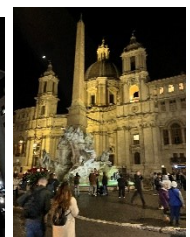
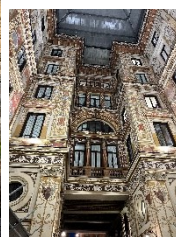
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- Visited St. Mary Major Basilica, *“the largest Catholic Marian Church of Rome was built under Pope Sixtus III between 432 and 440, following the 431 proclamation that Mary was indeed Mother of God. The “Crypt of the Nativity”, or “Bethlehem Crypt”, located beneath the high altar, boasts a crystal reliquary which is said to contain wood from the Holy Crib of Jesus Christ.”*



- Visited the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, (the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem). *“According to Christian tradition, the basilica was consecrated circa 325 to house the relics of the Passion of Jesus Christ brought to Rome from the Holy Land by Empress Helena, mother of Roman Emperor Constantine I. The basilica's floor was covered with soil from Jerusalem, thus acquiring the title in Hierusalem; it is not dedicated to the Holy Cross of Jerusalem, but the basilica was considered in a sense to be “in Jerusalem” (much in the way that an embassy today is considered extraterritorial). Several famous relics of questionable authority are housed in the Cappella delle Reliquie, built in 1930, including part of the Elogium or Titulus Crucis, the panel which was hung on Christ's Cross; two thorns of the Crown of Thorns; part of a nail; the index finger of St. Thomas; and three small wooden pieces of the True Cross. A much larger piece of the True Cross was taken from the Basilica on the instructions of Pope Urban VIII in 1629 to St. Peter's Basilica, where it is kept near the colossal statue of St. Empress Helena.”* It's a matter of Faith...you decide what's true.



- We were dropped off close to the top of the Spanish Steps to begin “a walk through Rome.”
 - Walked past the Basilica of St. Augustine in Campo Marzio which was one of the first Roman churches of the Renaissance, and its origins date back to the 14th century, on the way to
 - the Fontana di Trevi (Trevi Fountain). *In the times of Ancient Rome, this fountain served as the terminal point of the Aqua Virgo, the main aqueduct that supplied thermal baths.*
 - We then walked past the Teatro Quirino, the opera house in Rome where the exterior courtyard has frescos depicting women.
 - We walked past the Sant'Ignazio Loyola Church that has a 2-dimensional painting on the ceiling that looks like a 3-dimensional dome.

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- We walked to the Piazza della Rotondo where the Pantheon is located. *The square gets its name from the Pantheon's informal title as the church of Santa Maria Rotonda. A former Roman temple, the Pantheon has been a Catholic church (Basilica Santa Maria ad Martyres or Basilica of St. Mary and the Martyrs) since 609AD. In the center of the piazza is a fountain, the Fontana del Pantheon (1575), surmounted by an Egyptian obelisk (1711).*
- Proceeded to the Piazza Navona. *This square was built on the former Stadium of Domitian or "Circus Agonalis" ("competition arena") where events were held that martyred Christians (86 A.D). At one time the Circus was filled with a meter of water for gladiator-on-boats style fights. At the center of this square, stands the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi (Fountain of the Four Rivers). There are four figures that represent four rivers: the Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Rio de la Plata.*
- 6:45pm We then made our back to the hotel for dinner, and overnight in Rome

Tuesday, January 16: St. Peter's Basilica

- 7:00am Breakfast at hotel
 - 8:00am Took short walk to St. Peter's Square
-  "Being in the Moment," we met at the sculpture "Angels Unawares," a stunning bronze sculpture by Timothy Schmalz installed in St. Peter's Square in the Vatican since September 29, 2019, the 105th World Migrant and Refugee Day. This statue was inaugurated by Pope Francis in 2019 for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, where he said he wanted the sculpture "to remind everyone of the evangelical challenge of hospitality."



- Proceeded past the "Vatican obelisk" to 9:30am Mass at the largest Christendom Church, St. Peter's Basilica.
 - This Basilica was built on the site where St. Peter, the first Pope and Bishop of Rome, is buried and near where he was martyred. We viewed Michelangelo's Pieta, a stunning marble sculpture depicting the Virgin Mary holding Christ after His crucifixion, death, and removal off the cross before being placed in the tomb.
- Viewed the magnificent altar and Pope John XXIII tomb...he has massive hands!
- Went on the Vatican Scavi Tour is "a 90 minute guided excursion through the underground Necropolis, the ancient underground cemetery that houses St Peter's tomb. St. Peter's tomb is near the west end of a complex of family mausoleums that date between about AD 130 and AD 300. The top of the hill was

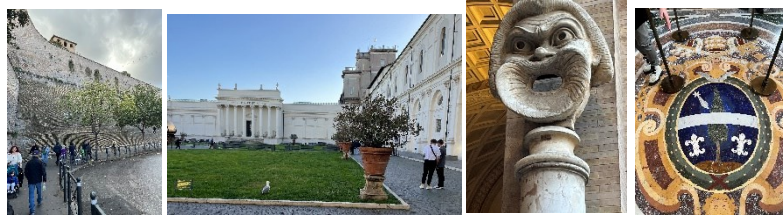
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excavated and the cemetery complex was partially torn down to be filled with earth to provide a foundation for the building of the first St. Peter's Basilica during the reign of Constantine I in about AD 330. Many bones have been found at the site of the 2nd-century shrine.

As the result of two campaigns of archaeological excavation, which confirmed the location of St. Peter's tomb directly under the altar of St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Pius XII stated in December 1950 that none of the bones could be confirmed to be Saint Peter's with absolute certainty. Following the discovery of the bones of a man without feet wrapped in a cloth in a niche of the "Graffiti Wall" in the tomb. (The body of a person crucified upside down, as St. Peter was, would have had their feet cut off to remove them from the cross.) On June 26, 1968, Pope Paul VI said that the bone relics of Saint Peter had been identified in a manner considered convincing that they were truly St. Peter. "

The Vatican Savi Tour is one of the most exclusive tours in all of Rome. Only 250 people are allowed through each day – compared to the 30,000 that visit the Vatican Museums! The tour was in a small group of 12 people. The grand finale was a visit to the actual tomb of Saint Peter, where we saw the niche and the reliquary holding the bones. "Being in the Moment," I believe.

12:00pm Lunch on our own at one of the many restaurants near the Vatican.



- 2:00pm Proceeded along the wall of the Vatican to the outside-the-Vatican Museum entrance. Saw wild caper bushes growing in the crevasses. Met our guide Antionette who took us places we had never been to on our visit 20 years ago: from a window, saw the church at the top of the Spanish Steps, visited a large green courtyard inside the Vatican, learned about the Sistine Chapel frescos that inspired Michaelangelo before he frescoed the ceiling, visited one of the many Vatican Museums to see the many statues rescued from ancient Rome villas, impressive edifices, galleries where 2D ceiling paintings looked 3D, and awe-inspiring relics. Additionally, our group observed the Tapestry Gallery, the Gallery of Maps, and in the Sistine Chapel with Michelangelo Buonarroti's masterpieces, the fresco of the Last Judgment, as well as his ceiling frescos completed in 1482.
- 6:00pm Trekked back to our hotel.
- 7:00pm Dinner and overnight at the Hotel Michaelangelo.

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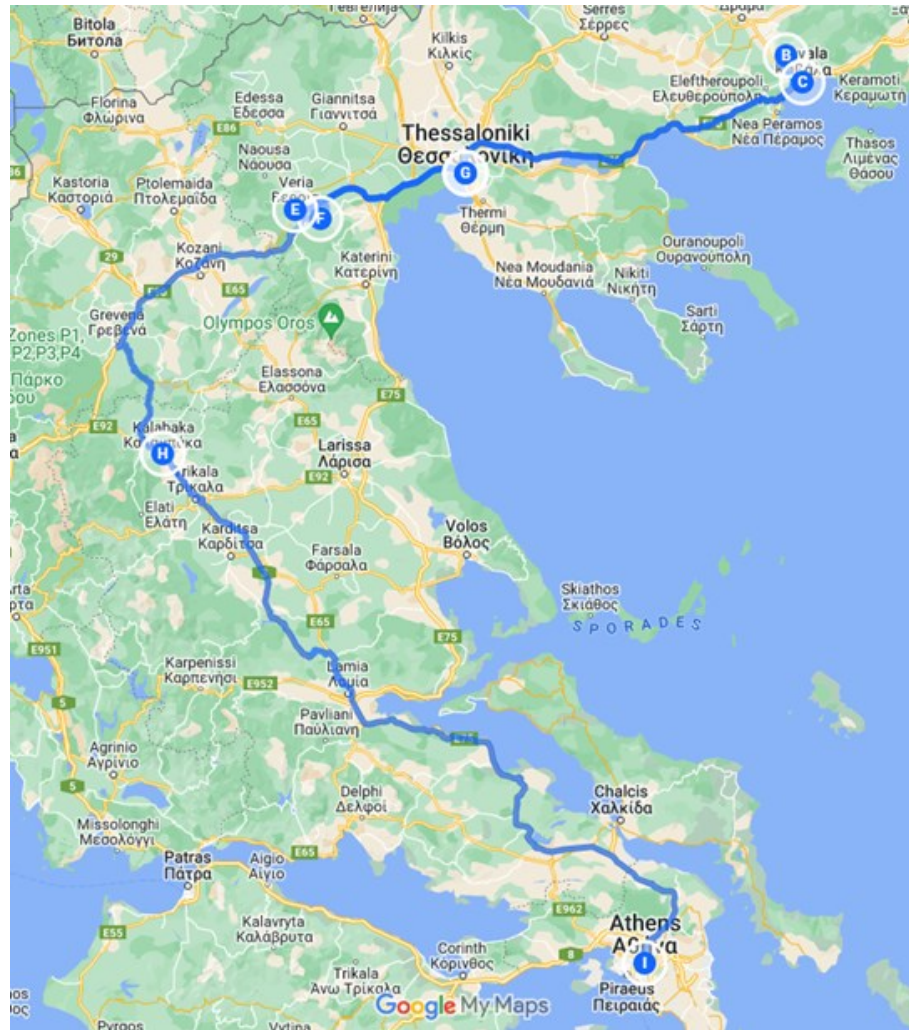
Wednesday, January 17: Papal Audience in Rome and Arrival in Thessalonika

- 6:30am Breakfast and checkout at Hotel Michelangelo



- 7:00am “Being in the Moment, embracing our discomfort,” we walked in the rain to St. Peter’s to attend the 9:00am Papal Audience...the crowds were impressive...Maurizio had secured special invitations for the - total surprise - INDOOR audience.... In winter the Audience is moved to the 6,300 seat Hall of Pope Paul VI. Pope Francis walked on stage to his chair...presenters introduced us attendees from all over the world...a 5th grade school class sat behind us...The Pope blessed each group. The Imperial Royal Circus in full uniforms gave a performance...dancers from the Ukraine, men from Cuba, and a few adults and children from Tuscany Italy. Quite a joyous show! Pope Francis left in his wheelchair.
- 10:00am Walked back to the hotel to transfer to the Rome airport FCO to fly to Greece.
- Turkish Airlines to Istanbul IST:
 - 2:24pm Flight TK 1866. ARR: 7:25pm (dur 1:54 hours)
 - Lunch at FCO...Dinner at the Istanbul airport IST
- 8:40pm Connected to fly Turkish Airlines to Thessaloniki SKG
 - Flight TK 1893. ARR: 9:00pm (dur 1:20 hours)
- 10:00pm Checked-in the 407 room Capsis Hotel in Thessaloniki.

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Thursday, January 18: Thessaloniki, Philippi, Kavala, Thessaloniki

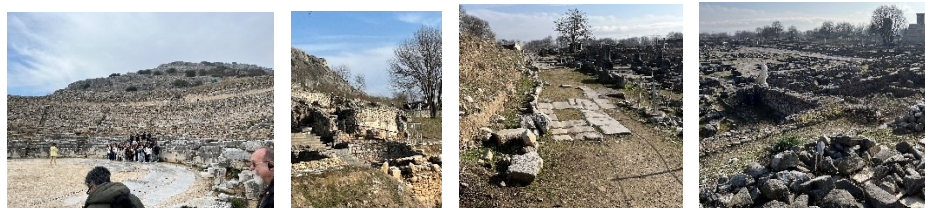
- 7:00am Breakfast at the Capsis Hotel
- 8:00am Trip to Philippi

Visited Philippi, the town where Paul delivered his first sermon in Europe, sowing the seeds of Christianity. *“And from there [He went] to Philippi, which is the leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman Colony. We remained in this city some days...” (Acts 16:11-12).*

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- Visited Baptistry of St. Lydia. *“Paul arrived here with Silas and Luke on the winter of AD 49. There the first Christian baptism was performed, of a woman named Lydia. Although they were prosecuted and arrested, they received God’s help to escape from prison (Acts 16: 25-26) where there was the conversion of the jailer (Acts 16: 31)”*
- Had our baptismal vows renewed by Father Malachy at the spot of St. Lydia’s baptism!
- Mass in the small café with a warm fire at the baptism site. Deacon Keith preached about we Deacons being Heralds of the Gospel.
- Visited the Greek Orthodox church on site with it’s beautiful icons.



- Visited the Ancient Phillipi Roman archeological site of the city of 40,000 people.
 - Saw the probable site of the prison cell where Paul and Silas were arrested and jailed.
 - Walked on the Egnatian Way with our “local guide dog” Hermes. *“The Egnatian Way was the main land route across northern Greece that St. Paul would follow in Macedonia from Neapolis to Philippi and Thessalonica. The Romans were superb road builders grading and paving the major routes to make armies movements and commerce easy. The Egnatian Way or Via Egnatia extended over 900 miles from the Adriatic Sea (modern day Albania) on the western shore to the straits at Byzantium (later called Constantinople or Istanbul) to the east. The road was a major commerce link between Italy and Asia. “*
- After a late lunch I noticed I had 3 voicemails: two from neighbors and one from the Forsyth County water department. A pipe burst from the freezing temperatures and water was leaking down the driveway into the street ...see the attached homily in Greece for more details.
- Because I was dealing with the crisis at home, I missed the visit to *the city of Kavala, the ancient city of Neapolis (Acts 16:11) where Paul landed with his disciples, Timothy and Silas. It was later renamed Christoupolis, meaning city of Christ, because it was the first European city to accept Christianity.*
- 5:00pm Drove to Thessaloniki to visit the Greek Othodox Cathedral of St. Demetrius, the patron saint of the city. *“The first church on the spot was constructed in the early 4th century AD, replacing a Roman bath. Repeatedly gutted by fires, the church eventually was reconstructed as a five-aisled basilica in 629–634. Thessaloniki became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1430. About 60 years later, the church was converted into a mosque, known as the Kasimiye Camii The symbolic tomb however was kept open*

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for Christian veneration. Other magnificent mosaics, recorded as covering the church interior, were lost either during the four centuries when it functioned as a mosque (1493–1912) or in the Great Thessaloniki Fire of 1917 that destroyed much of the city. Following the Great Fire of 1917, it took decades to restore the church. Tombstones from the city's Jewish cemetery - destroyed by the Greek and Nazi German authorities - were used as building materials in these restoration efforts in the 1940s. Archeological excavations conducted in the 1930s and 1940s revealed interesting artifacts that may be seen in a museum situated inside the church's crypt. The excavations also uncovered the ruins of a Roman bath, where St. Demetrius was said to have been held prisoner and executed. A Roman well was also discovered. Scholars believe this is where soldiers dropped the body of St. Demetrius after his execution. After restoration, the church was reconsecrated in 1949.”

- 7:00pm returned to the Capsis Hotel for dinner and overnight.

Friday, January 19 Thessaloniki to Veria to Vergina to Kalambaka

- 7:00am Breakfast at the Capsis Hotel



- 8:45am Mass at in Thessaloniki at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral; one of the four Roman Catholic churches in Thessaloniki. I served and preached about St. Paul’s relationship with Jesus...see attached homily for Greece. Father Malachy gave a very special blessing for us Deacons and wives.
- Drove to Veroia (Beria), a town evangelized by Paul (Acts 17: 10-14).
 - “When Saint Paul visited this town in AD50, he came across a “noble” Jewish community where he preached and created an important Church. This is where Paul met Sopatros (or Sosipatros), who would later become a valuable comrade who followed him on his return journey to Asia. “



- Visited the ancient Jewish quarter of Barbouta through a gateway and saw their synagogue. During WWII the Nazis sealed off the gateway to capture all the Jews. It’s a sad commentary that no Jews live in Veria today.



- Visited Vergina, “the legendary burial site of the Macedonian kings. The Archeological Museum of Vergina is a World Heritage Site, and also known as the Royal Tombs and houses the tomb of King Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. Hundreds of items are displayed including delicate gold crowns, elaborate jewelry, the King’s shield and armor, colorful wall paintings, mosaics, hundreds of

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ancient items used by the imperial family.”

- 1:45pm Lunch at the Philippion Restaurant
- 3:00pm Drove on to arrive after dark in Kalambaka, in the middle of Greece, at a local Icon workshop, ZHNAPOC, the Zindros House of Byzantine Icons. www.zindros.gr
 - *“Our company was founded by Zindros Dimitrios in 1974 in a small workshop in Meteora with the main purpose of producing exact copies of Byzantine Icons and with the aim of preserving and spreading the art of visual Hagiography and Orthodox Byzantine Art...Combining traditional techniques and modern technology we produce high quality products, while remaining faithful to the Byzantine Principles as they were established in the first half of the second millennium. A huge variety of Icons is exhibited in the Permanent Exhibition located in Kalabaka, under the Holy rocks of Meteora. The visitor can choose between lithography, serigraphy, silver and gold Icons as well as wonderful hand painted creations of excellent painters. Byzantine Icons on flat, engraved and carved wood, plain, diptychs and triptychs, with a background of genuine gold leaf...”*

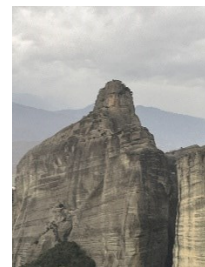


We purchased a carved Icon of the crucified Christ with archangels Gabriel and Michael.

- 6:00pm checked in the 170 room Amalia Hotel for dinner and overnight

Saturday, January 20: Kalambaka/Meteora to Athens

- 7:00am Breakfast and checkout



- 8:00am We drove up the steep mountain to visit the spectacular Meteora, “which is a mountainous region of stunning scenery. We saw old Byzantine monasteries on top of huge rocks which were first built in the 14th century by monks seeking isolation from the Barbarians and for salvation. “At their peak in the 16th century, there were 24 monasteries at Meteora in Greece. They were created to serve monks and nuns following the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Today there are six still functioning, (The Great Meteoron, Monastery of Varlaam, Monastery of Rousanou, Monastery of St. Nicholas Anapausas, Monastery of the Holy Trinity, and Monastery of St. Stephen) while the remainder

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are largely in ruin. Perched onto high cliffs, they are now accessible (hah, don't believe it!) by staircases and pathways (and dangling ropes!) cut into the rock formations."

○ Visited two of them:

1. *"The Monastery of Varlaam is the second largest monastery of Meteora...1224 feet above the valley floor. The name Varlaam comes from a monk named Varlaam who scaled the rocks in 1350 and began construction on the monasteries. Varlaam built three churches by hoisting materials up the face of the cliffs. After Varlaam's death, the monastery was abandoned for two hundred years until two monk brothers, Theophanes and Nektarios Apsarades, came to the rock in the 16th century and began to rebuild the churches in October 1517. The two brothers from Ioannina spent twenty-two years hoisting materials to the top of the rock formation and the quickly built the churches within a few years. Monks have been present since the 16th century, however, there has been a constant decline in their presence since the 17th century. The museum is open to travelers and contains a wide array of relics and ecclesiastical treasures. As of 2015 there are seven monks remaining in Varlaam."*



I dared not try to cross the bridge over the abyss or try to climb the stone stairs hanging off the sides of the mountain! I stayed on high ground marveling at the distance to the valley floor and the ropes dangling from the structures to winch up supplies...or the tiny tram that brings people to the monastery. Shear terror!!

2. The Monastery of St. Stephen (the martyred Deacon). *"The original monastery was believed to have been built in the 14th century, however, a new katholikon was built in 1798 making it the newest of all the meteorite structures.. The church's interior was decorated with frescoes on the inside for a short period after 1545. However, During the World wars, the monasteries were bombed heavily and ransacked in the belief that the monks were holding refugees. As of 2015, the Monastery of St. Stephen is home to 28 nuns after its conversion to a nunnery in 1961."*



"Being in the Moment," while I was standing on the church porch, I remembered the Icon I saw last Easter in a Greek Orthodox church. It was of Jesus reaching into Hell to rescue Adam and Eve. Aliki explained the Icon "The Resurrection" is in every Greek Orthodox church and then proceeded to show us the one here at St. Stephens. *"The Icon is called Christ's Descent into Hades, Anastasis or the Resurrection Icon. It is the primary icon of Pascha (Easter) and is on display for 40 days. "The icon of the Resurrection depicts not what happened on Easter Sunday. It actually reflects what happened on Holy Saturday. It does not show Christ coming out of the tomb, like a super- hero, carrying a banner that says "I cheated death." It shows our most Merciful Lord, descending into Hades, and raising all those who had fallen through death."*

"Christ is shown grabbing the wrists of Adam and Eve. This is an important part of the icon. When people greet one another and shake hands, this denotes a position of equality, you might even say that symbolically it means meeting one another halfway. The depiction of Christ grabbing the wrist of Adam tells us that we are not equal with God.

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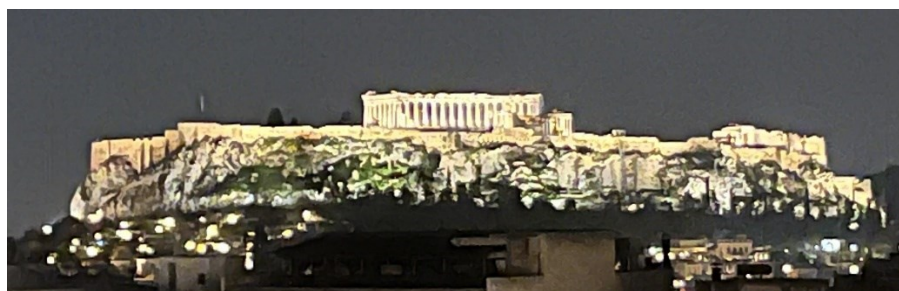
We cannot even meet God halfway, but if we reach out to God, He is ready to grasp us by the wrist to take us with Him to Paradise. This is the most hopeful part of the icon. It reminds us that we have to reach out to God in faith, and let Him take care of the rest."



I purchased an Icon of the Resurrection at the nun's shop....I told Aliko that I never expected that an Icon could make me cry...it did! And, I told her the Icon is so emotional for me because I believe the love and mercy of Jesus is so powerful that Hell is empty, not full. [Google "Bishop Robert Barron is Hell crowded or empty? It's a matter of Faith...you decide]

- 11:30am lunch break in Kalabaka
- 1:00pm Transferred to Athens via bus.
- 7:00pm Checked-in 385 room Titania hotel, Athens for Mass, dinner and overnight.

View of Parthenon from the Titania 11th floor "Olive Tree" restaurant balcony:



Sunday, January 21: Athens

- 7:00am Breakfast
- 8:00am Drove to Corinth.
 - "Corinth derives its name from Ancient Corinth, a city-state of antiquity. *"The site was occupied from before 3000 BC. Historical references begin with the early 8th century BC, when Corinth began to develop as a commercial center. In about 550 BC, an oligarchical government seized power. This government allied with Sparta within the Peloponnesian League, and Corinth participated in the Persian Wars and Peloponnesian War as an ally of Sparta. After Sparta's victory in the Peloponnesian war, the two allies fell out with one another, and Corinth pursued an independent policy in the various wars of the early 4th century BC. After the Macedonian unification of Greece, the Acrocorinth was the seat of a Macedonian garrison until 243 BC. Nearly a century later, in 146 BC, Corinth was captured and was completely destroyed by the Roman army. Located on the Peloponnesian Peninsula, the modern coastal city of Corinth was built after an earthquake destroyed the original city in 1858."*
 - *The footsteps of Paul...and the spread of the Gospel...lead through Corinth, a Greek coastal city that is an ideal destination for faith-based groups and other travelers who enjoy Greek history, food and culture. When the apostle Paul arrived in Corinth on his second missionary journey, he found a*

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bustling center of trade, perfect for spreading the Gospel to others living around the world. Acts 18 says that Paul lived and worked in Corinth for 18 months as a tent-maker alongside Aquila and Priscilla while preaching and establishing a congregation of believers, before the three of them continued on to Ephesus.”



- We stopped to view the Corinth Canal. *“It is an artificial canal that connects the Gulf of Corinth in the Ionian Sea with the Saronic Gulf in the Aegean Sea. It cuts through the narrow Isthmus of Corinth and separates the Peloponnese from the Greek mainland, making the peninsula an island. The canal was dug through the Isthmus at sea level and has no locks. It is 4 miles in length and only 80.7 feet wide at sea level, making it impassable for many modern ships. The canal was initially proposed in classical times and a failed effort was made to build it in the 1st century AD. Construction recommenced in 1881 but was hampered by geological and financial problems that bankrupted the original builders. It was completed in 1893, but, due to the canal's narrowness, navigational problems, and periodic closures to repair landslides from its steep walls, it failed to attract the level of traffic expected by its operators.”*
- We stopped at the Archeological Museum of Ancient Corinth.



- Saw “headless” statues of local dignitaries that actually had interchangeable heads so they could be replaced by heads of subsequent leaders.
- As a center of healing, there was a room of clay “body parts” depicting maladies that could be treated.
- Saw evidence of a synagogue building
- Saw the amphitheater, the Acropolis with it’s sacrificial altar, the meat market where the sacrificed animals were sold, the Forum, and the gateway for visitors arriving from the docks.

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- Saw the ruins of the ancient church near the dock in Cenchreae, on the shore of the Saronic Gulf of the Aegean Sea, where Phoebe, a local Deaconess, left for Rome to deliver St. Paul's letter. *"Phoebe is mentioned only once in the Bible, in Romans 16:1–2, where Paul writes, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me."*

"Letters of introduction to strangers were common in Bible times. The mention of Phoebe in this way means that she was probably either the bearer of the letter or accompanied those who took it to Rome. The name Phoebe means "bright and radiant," and from Paul's comments about her it seems that those words characterized her personality and her Christian life.

Paul's reference to Phoebe as "our sister" indicates that she was a member of the Christian church and his sister in Christ. Her designation as "deacon" (or "servant") could mean that she held an official position within the church as a deaconess or simply that she was someone who was known to serve the church faithfully (the Greek diakonos means "servant"). Whether or not Phoebe had the title "deaconess," it is clear that she was a trusted member of the body of believers in Cenchreae. "Being in the Moment," I believe she was a Deacon.

Paul commends Phoebe to the Roman believers and asks that they receive her in a gracious and friendly manner into their homes and hearts with love and affection. She was to be welcome in their church fellowship. Asking for her to be received "in a way worthy of [God's] people" means that the church should treat Phoebe with the special respect and Christian love that should characterize all believers' interactions with one another. Even those believers we have never met before should be welcomed with love, for we share a bond in the Lord (John 13:35). Phoebe was to be aided in whatever business she would be conducting in Rome.

Paul adds that Phoebe was a helper of many. Phoebe may have shown great kindness in various ways to other Christians. Paul himself was a beneficiary of Phoebe's kind servant's heart. Whatever Phoebe's precise role in the church, the inclusion of her name in Romans 16 is a testimony to her character and ensures that she will never be forgotten."

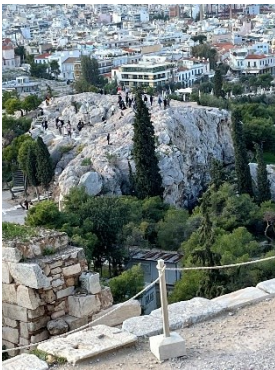
Believe me, I can't wait to share this photo and story with my 7-year-old granddaughter, Phoebe!

- 12:00pm Lunch break at a Corinth restaurant on the canal

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- 1:00pm Headed back to Athens to visit the Acropolis. The climb up the Acropolis was not as daunting as it looks. The parking lot is relatively close to the entrance/exit and the path is not steep.
 - We first walked to Mars' Hill (Areopagus) where Paul preached the truth to the Gentile Nation.



- *"The Areopagus is a prominent rock outcropping located below the Acropolis. Its English name is the Late Latin composite form of the Greek name Areios Pagos, translated "Hill of Ares." The name Areopagus also referred, in classical times, to the Athenian governing council, later restricted to the Athenian judicial council or court that tried cases of deliberate homicide, wounding, and religious matters, as well as cases involving arson of olive trees, because they convened in this location.*

The exact origin of the Areopagus is unclear. In pre-classical times (before the 5th century BC), the Areopagus may have been a council of elders for the city of Athens, and membership was restricted to those who had held high public office, in this case that of Archon. Homicide trials seem to have been held on the Areopagus hill as early as the 7th century BC and possibly as far back as the mid-8th century BC."



- We viewed the "Odeon of Herodes Atticus, the ancient theater on the Acropolis.

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- On the top of the Acropolis we were buffeted by a strong wind. We walked to the other side of the Parthenon before heading back down. We saw
 - the Temple of Nike, a temple dedicated to the goddesses Athena and Nike. Built around 420 BC, the temple is the earliest fully Ionic temple on the Acropolis. It has a prominent position overlooking the entrance to the Acropolis.
 - *“The Erechtheum or Temple of Athena Polias is an ancient Greek Ionic temple on the north side of the Acropolis, Athens, which was primarily dedicated to the goddess Athena.”*
 - *“The Parthenon is a former temple that was dedicated to the goddess Athena during the fifth century BC. It was built in thanksgiving for the Hellenic victory over Persian Empire invaders during the Greco-Persian Wars. Construction started in 447 BC when the Delian League was at the peak of its power. It was completed in 438 BC.*

Its decorative sculptures are considered some of the high points of classical Greek art, an enduring symbol of Ancient Greece, democracy and Western civilization. The Parthenon was built primarily by men who knew how to work marble. These quarrymen had exceptional skills and were able to cut the blocks of marble to very specific measurements. The quarrymen also knew how to avoid the faults, which were numerous in the Pentelic marble. A big project like the Parthenon attracted stonemasons from far and wide who travelled to Athens to assist in the project. Slaves and foreigners worked together with the Athenian citizens in the building of the Parthenon, doing the same jobs for the same pay. Temple building was a specialized craft, and there were not many men

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in Greece qualified to build temples like the Parthenon, so these men would travel and work where they were needed.”

- 5:00 returned to the Titania hotel, Athens for Mass, dinner and overnight. Deacon Brian preached about the challenge of always looking beyond ourselves to see Jesus.

Monday, January 22: Athens, Atlanta

- 2:15am Early wakeup, check-out and transfer to Athens Airport for flights home
 - 6:40am departure on Lufthansa Flight LH 1285 to Frankfurt. ARR: 8:50am (dur 3:10 hours)
 - 11:00am delayed connection to Atlanta on Lufthansa LH 444. ARR: 2:50pm (dur 10:30 hours). Surprisingly good pasta meal and later cheese sandwich. Watched 4 movies (Barbie, Hypnotic, Good Luck to You, Leo Grande, and Chocolat). Snoozed frequently accumulating maybe 2 hours sleep. Not overly tired when we landed. Baggage claim took almost an hour. Shuttled to Domestic Terminal and then then shuttled to ParknFly...just in time for rush hour...1:10 hours to get home ...after 7:00pm.

Home again, Home again, Jiggety Jig!

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HOMILY FOR GREECE

Preached on Friday January 19, 2024 at 8:45am at the Roman Catholic Immaculate Conception Cathedral, Thessaloniki, Greece. One of only 4 Roman Catholic churches in the city...consecrated May 3, 1900...heavily damaged in WWII...restoration took from 1946 until 2008.

I decided to prepare two homilies for our pilgrimage...one about St. Peter's relationship with Christ for Italy and this one about St. Paul's relationship with Christ for Greece.

During last Advent, the Third week's Gospel was about John the Baptist clearing the path for the coming of the anointed one born into this world. But, what if that was all that happened? What if Jesus was born, grew up, prayed, preached, performed miracles, was arrested, suffered, died and was resurrected, and then He did nothing else as He waited to return at the end of time? He probably would have gone down in history as a great prophet, a splendid orator, a mystical religious figure. And that would be wonderful. But the world has had plenty of people like that. If that was all that happened, then how did Jesus change the world so dramatically?

Well, in fact, Jesus brought together word and deed unlike anyone else before or since—he comforted souls and healed bodies. He made His preaching credible with His love in action. And then the Risen Christ continued to come into our lives. When people joined themselves to Christ, they were transformed into His hands and feet throughout the world.... and, the world changed for the better. Since Jesus' death and resurrection it has been through our human experiences of Christ truly present in our lives that became the pathway through which Jesus has continued to enter the world. And, I'm not just talking about Catholics or Christians ...I'm talking about everyone's experience of Christ in their lives. That shouldn't surprise us, but, I think it does. As John testified, *"there is one among you whom you do not recognize..."* Many saw and experienced Christ, even immediately after His death, Jews and Gentiles...and even St. Paul heard about the Jesus who people were saying was the Christ. But they didn't recognize Him until they experienced a conversion of heart...a transformation. Those in the garden...those in the locked room...those on the road to Emmaus...those on the road to Damascus...and, all were transformed.

We may not have an encounter with Jesus like St. Paul had, but maybe, just maybe we can recognize and be transformed to experience the Risen Christ like he did. For the last 2000 years we Catholics have experienced the Risen Christ's loving presence many ways: yes, in the Sacred Word of God, in the Holy Eucharist, in the other Sacraments, in prayer, but maybe most of all, in each other...especially the poor and suffering. But, do we always recognize Him? All of these personal experiences are empowered by the Holy Spirit, and that's why right now is the perfect time to pray for our hearts to be transformed. Until we are, we have to wonder if we will ever recognize, if we will ever encounter Jesus in our lives?...will we will ever become the Body of Christ?

Our recent Advent Scriptures told us that God loves us so much that He sent Jesus to bring all mankind the promised gifts of justice, glad tidings, healing, liberty, and God's peace and love. And when our hearts are open to His promise, we can help deliver those gifts. We must respond to Him with praise and gratitude and action every day of our lives like St. Paul did. It was not easy for St. Paul, and he didn't always feel comfortable ...but he surely was transformed into the kind of person Jesus wanted him to be.

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Today, we can embrace His promised gifts if we call to Jesus with an attitude of transformation ...with our hearts open to be converted. That is the way that we can be awakened to encounter the Risen Christ like St. Paul did in the Sacred Word of God, in the Holy Eucharist, in the other Sacraments, in our prayers, and in everyone we meet...but only if our hearts are open to Him. In other words, if we let Him, Jesus will teach us what kind of person He wants us to be. Every day that we are the Body of Christ, the world changes for the better!

Let me share what happened yesterday. After our late lunch when we boarded the bus, I noticed there were 3 voicemails waiting for me: two from neighbors and one from the Forsyth County water department. A pipe had burst from the freezing temperatures and water was leaking down the driveway into the street. Thankfully, my neighbor walks his dog early in the morning, saw the water and shut off the valve at the street. Well, my imagination immediately went wild: Will our Pilgrimage be done? Is there water in the house? Will we have to go home to fix it? Will insurance cover the leak or pay for our early return? I prayed, "Dear Lord, I'm going to need some help here." Then I realized He already had 3 people call me! After 4 more calls and a few texts I had a plumber on the way to my house to assess the situation and a friend on the way to enter our home to see if there was any water...the leak was near the curb...no water was in the house. Within 7 hours of my voicemails I had approved the quote and the plumber would fix the leak the next day! Now if that wasn't God's love in our life and an encounter with the Risen Christ, I don't know what is!

So, "Brothers and sisters: Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. ... retain what is good...Refrain from every kind of evil."

I thank the Lord, there's people out there like you!

Because of you, I know God loves us...I know He loves me!

I like this homily because I preached much of it on the 3rd Sunday of Advent at St. Andrew Catholic Church in Roswell, GA. I was scheduled to serve, but not to preach...I had prepared a homily that week anyway.... something (someone?) nudged me to bring a copy to church that morning. Father Juan arrived only a few minutes before Mass...I offered to preach and he welcomed the idea

Thank you, Jesus, I recognize that you are in my life!

HOMILY FOR ITALY

I decided to prepare two homilies for our pilgrimage...this one about St. Peter's relationship with Christ for Italy and one about St. Paul's relationship with Christ for Greece.

Being here in Italy visiting St. Peter's Basilica, which was built on the site of St. Peter's burial near where he died, and driving past the Church of Domine Quo Vadis where St. Peter had a vision of Jesus, I couldn't help but remember my first visit to Rome in 2004 when my son and daughter-in-law were married. It truly was a transforming trip for me.

I have been a Catholic since I was 20 years old and for most of those years my mantra, my constant prayer, has been *"I love you Jesus."* When I was discerning to become a Deacon, one day I heard the question, *"do you love Jesus?"* Immediately, I responded to myself saying, *"Well, yes, of course I do"*...I continued, *"Then Fraser, put your money where your mouth is!"*...I said yes to the Deaconate. A couple of years later I was about half way through formation, and I distinctly remember hearing John's Gospel where Jesus asked Peter three times, *"Do you love me?"* I couldn't help but put myself in Peter's shoes...*"Yes Lord, you know that I love you!"* And, I couldn't help but be affirmed that I was on the mission that He wanted me on.

In John chapter 21, Jesus' spoke with his leading apostle, Peter, the "coward"...the denier." Many say this dialogue is Peter being forgiven by the Lord for denying him three times. But Peter never asked for forgiveness and Jesus never forgives him. These verses are not about dealing with forgiveness as we know it when we say, "I'm sorry, please forgive me." It's not that. It's something much deeper.

Jesus takes Peter aside and he says to him three times, *"do you love me?"* And he responds, *"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."* So the key, you see is not in forgiveness...The key is in the love.

Each of us are born into this world with a deep and lasting hunger at the center of our hearts, and that hunger can only be satisfied by the love of God. There is more to forgiveness than asking for forgiveness or even saying I'm sorry. Jesus reached down into Peter's inability to ask for forgiveness. And rightfully so. Peter was the leader, he was the one who was going to lead His Church and yet, Peter denied Him and swore and cursed. What he did was unforgivable. Peter had no right to ask for forgiveness because he had overstepped the boundary of betraying God Himself, viciously and out of fear and distress. So what exactly then makes this such a lovely Gospel?

Well, it's Jesus reaching down into that basic yearning of every human being...He meets us right where we are...our sin doesn't define us in His eyes. God reaches down...into the deepest part of our hearts, into our souls where the yearning for His love is born and stays with us no matter how many sins, no matter how many betrayals, no matter what we do. Jesus, in his great generosity, forgets everything else and reaches down and says to Peter...and to us: *"Feed my sheep....I love you, I trust you and now I ask you to take care of them for me."* And when Peter hears that, three times, he knows that there is something here more than forgiveness. It is that Jesus loves us and forgets everything except his love for us...and, He has a mission for us! God wants Peter to continue to be the one who would lead His church...and, Peter is transformed to be a great witness of how a life of faith is lived for Jesus Christ, despite its trials.

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And that's the lovely thing about John's Gospel. God tells us every day, *"you don't have to cry out for my forgiveness, for I have loved you from the beginning, and I will be faithful and true to that love...forever."*

John's Gospel also included an ominous prediction of Peter's future death which reminded me that on my previous trip I had learned how St. Peter trusted God's will in his life and embraced God's love. On a tour of Christian Rome, we had visited four of the great Basilicas and were on our way to the catacombs. I asked our guide if we could visit the "Quo Vadis" church. He said it wasn't much of a church to see, but immediately understood when I explained that I was a Deacon in the Catholic Church. The site of the small chapel-size church is on the Old Appian Way outside of Rome, near the catacombs of St. Callixtus. The ancient church is built on the spot where legend has it that when Peter was fleeing for his life from Nero, he had a vision of Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, *"domine, quo vadis?"* or *"Lord, where are you going?"* Jesus replied, *"I am returning to Rome to be crucified again."* With that Peter knew what he had to do...he embraced God's love...he stopped running from death and returned to Rome himself... to lead...to be led where he did not want to go. In the church there are paintings on either side of the altar. On the right a painting of Christ crucified. On the left, one of St. Peter crucified upside down. St. Jerome said that Peter demanded to be crucified this way because he didn't feel worthy to be crucified the same way as Jesus.

Today's Scriptures are all about God's unconditional love. He doesn't want us to just go through the motions of faith. He wants us to be obedient to His saving power of love. In response, let's commit with gratitude, *"Dear Lord, we too, will feed your sheep. We too, will serve others. We too, will follow you and reach out to all the people around us so they will experience your unconditional love, as well."*

"I love you Jesus." Alleluia! Alleluia!

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My Packing List

Wearing To/From

Underwear
Undershirt
Button shirt
Jeans/belt
Fleece vest
Hat
Socks
Sketchers
Pouch w/daily Euros and 1 credit card
Money belt
iPhone

Money Belt

\$50
AAA Visa credit card (no foreign fees)
Costco Visa credit card (no foreign fees)
Visa debit card (no ATM fees)
Kaiser Permanente Medicare Advantage Card
Passport
Driver's license
Deacon ID
TravelGuard Policy 964946354

Back Pack

Neck pillow
Rain jacket
11-N95 masks
Fraser Itinerary
Good Shepherd Itinerary
2-Homilies
Lufthansa bookings
Turkish Air bookings
Copy of Roger Passport
Medicine bag
Cough drops
1-Power converter

3-earbuds
4-clorox disinfectant pads
4-tour envelopes
2-iPhone cords w/EU power adapters
Metal water bottle
Tissues

Suitcase

14-underwear
3-undershirts
10-socks
8-long sleeve Ts
1-long sleeve Henley
1-tan cargo pants
1-Black cargo pants
1-gingham button shirt
2-sweaters
1-Coat/gloves/scarf
Hokas
1-PJ bottoms
Daily Bag
Shaver/cord
Razor
Toothbrush
Tooth paste
Floss
Shampoo

Medicine Bag

14- Roger's Daily Meds
5- Oxycodone 5MG/Acetaminophen 325mg
10-Ondansetron 4mg (nausea)
4-Meclizine 25mg (travel sickness)
4-Rehydration salts
12-Loperamide Hydrochloride 2mg (anti-diarrheal)
6-Decongestant
Flonase
7-Anticeptic towelette