

# Notes from a Journal

## In the Footsteps of St. Paul: A Pilgrimage

by Sheryl Martello

### Sunday, May 29, 2005, Departure

We left St. Paul's parking lot and traveled to LAX via a limo bus. Due to the flight schedule, we were unable to stay for Divine Liturgy, which made many of us sad. It would have been a great way to start the trip. Linda and I discovered we had a similar experience while packing for the trip: last minutes doubts. Did we really want to go after all? I was happy to know, as a recent convert and new member at St. Paul's, that I wasn't the only one with reservations. What's a nice, newly converted ex-Protestant like me thinking of, heading off on a two week journey to God only knows where? I asked a few of the people on our team what they hoped to gain by joining this Pilgrimage. More than one said they hoped to know St. Paul better. One said she hoped to become closer to the saints. Why had I come? This led me to ponder a challenge we face in America in 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity: How do we close the gap between the ancient and the contemporary? Because of cultural/geographical differences, as well as a distance of 2,000 years between the events of the New Testament and contemporary Christian life, we tend to see our faith as 'abstract'. Father Steve has said we have a problem with putting flesh and blood and bone to our faith.

### Monday, May 30, Day One – Athens

One site that really caught my attention was the Roman emperor Hadrian's Arch. The great gateway is located adjacent to the Olympian excavation site, where the temple remains of the Olympian Zeus loom in the background. It was intimidating. It jarred the senses and easily transferred me back to the time of its glory. The reason this had such impact on me is that I took the name of Saint Agape at my chrismation, the youngest daughter of St. Sophia. All three of Sophia's daughters were tortured and murdered by Hadrian in 126 A.D. for refusing to deny their faith. Hadrian built this 59' high and 41' wide gate out of marble, and it stood as a reminder that this was his city (Hadrianopolis). I wondered how my little saint, her sisters and her mother must have felt when standing before this man of such intense, staggering power. In a flash of crystal-clear horror, I pictured little Agape's helplessness and fear. I was already experiencing a new awareness of the cultural climate faced by Sophia and her daughters that seemed to make her more real to me.

### Tuesday, May 31, Day Two – Athens

Our first stop was the *Metropolitan Cathedral of Athens*: In the large square in front of the Cathedral we paused to take pictures of a monument, a statue of Archbishop Damaskinos, who was the Archbishop of Athens during the Nazi occupation of Greece in WWII. A plaque at the base of the statue quotes him as saying, "The members of the clergy of the Church of Greece may not be shot; they may only be hanged. I beg you to

respect this tradition...” A memorial to St. Gregory V, a 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarch of Constantinople, is displayed within the church, together with his relics. He was murdered by the Turkish government in 1821, at the beginning of the Greek Revolution, by being hung from the doors of one of the churches in Constantinople. There is also a memorial, together with her relics, to St. Philothei, a 16<sup>th</sup> century nun who was known for her work among the poor. She was beaten to death in 1588 by Turks who invaded her convent. We had the opportunity to venerate the relics of both these saints, and it was a deeply moving experience. The church is filled with beautiful icons, paintings and frescoes. We continued on to another church – reputedly the oldest in the downtown area of Athens: the *Church of Kapnikarea*, dedicated to the Presentation of the Virgin Mary to the Temple. A mosaic of the Theotokos presides over the entrance, just above the doors. This church is literally in the middle of a busy street, with shops, people, bikes, and motorcycles all around. Inside, there was a mixture of old and new icons, frescoes and mosaics. I noted a very old, faded fresco, barely visible, of Sophia and her three daughters.



*Sheryl Martello standing at the foot of the steps leading to the Areopagus in Athens*

Today we also visited the Areopagus (Mars Hill), which is at the base of the climb to the Acropolis where the Parthenon sits majestically above the city of Athens. This is where Paul revealed the truth about the ‘unknown god’ to the philosophers and seekers of Athens in Acts 17:16-34. As Father Steve began to translate a little of the sermon from the New Testament Greek written on a plaque at the base of the hill, a few people gathered to hear him. I suddenly realized I was standing on the very New Testament ground I had read about for nearly 3 decades! Climbing the old stone stairs to the top of the hill, it was easy to picture Paul there, bringing the gospel to the seekers of his day. It occurred to me that it was significant that it was in this place – the Acropolis – which was the center of all the places of worship in Athens at that time - where Paul chose to preach the gospel. Clouds were gathering as we stood on the hill and the first rain drops fell. By the time we were ready to head up to the Acropolis and the Parthenon, rain began to seriously fall. “Did you know,” Father Steve asked, “that the Parthenon was a Christian Church dedicated to the Virgin Mary for more than a thousand years, longer than it was a

temple to the ancient Greek goddess Athena; and that during the Ottoman occupation of Greece it was converted into a mosque?” Dwarfed in the shadow of these pillars and incredible statues carved out of marble, one is struck by the fact that this is all so REAL. It’s not a phantasm, a cartoon or a Las Vegas façade. In our 200 year old country of America, we simply find it difficult to envision the sheer majesty of these monuments that humble us in the face of myriads of generations now gone, but somehow still present. For the first time in my life, I felt connected to an ancient world that really existed; to real people who walked up to this place to worship their gods – first Athena and other pagan deities - then the true God that the apostle Paul preached. How powerful the testimony of the Christian gospel must have been! It was this same gospel that Paul preached here that would turn the Mediterranean world upside down, bringing the worship of Christ to this place, demolishing centuries-old pagan worship!

### **Wednesday, June 1, Day Three – Corinth**

This morning we visited the Byzantine Museum near Constitution Square in Athens that houses magnificent displays of icons ranging from the 4<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Then we climbed aboard the bus and headed out to Corinth. I had reviewed the story of St. Paul standing before Gallio, the Roman governor, at the bema (Acts 18:1-18), and began to have a better sense of the type of risk he took and the danger he faced from his own people, the Jews of the synagogues in Corinth. Also, it was wonderful to reflect on the fact that it was here where he worked so closely with Aquila and Priscilla as a tentmaker. St. Paul wrote two letters to the Corinthians. In Corinth we visited the archaeological museum at the front entrance to the ancient ruins of the city. I stood within inches of an ancient bust of Nero that I found intriguing. This brutal, insane dictator was portrayed as a young and handsome, yet somewhat effeminate man. The eyes were blank marble, but it was easy enough to imagine a piercing cruelty. This was someone you wanted to hide from.



*The remains of the foundations of an ancient Byzantine Church at Cenchreae*

From here we departed to visit Cenchreae, the ancient eastern port of Corinth, which is where Paul shaved his head “because of a vow he had taken” (Acts 18:18). We stopped by the small harbor from which he sailed to Ephesus. Today this is a very picturesque beach. As I walked among the ruins in the blue waters, I tried to envision Paul setting sail.

## Thursday, June 2<sup>nd</sup>, Day Four – The Monastery of Osios Loukas and Delphi



*The 10<sup>th</sup> century Monastery of St. Luke of Steiris (Osios Loukas)*

We arrived at our first monastery: Osios Loukas. The founder, St. Luke of Steiris, was a 10<sup>th</sup> century monk who was known as a healer and a prophet. The entire monastery is simply beautiful, inside and out. This monastery is quite well-known for its thousand year-old Byzantine mosaics and early monastic architecture. It is perched high above a valley, adjacent to mountains that tower over the little farms and livestock far below. The monastery contains the relics of this St. Luke, which many of us venerated. Alan and Sheilagh described the monastery as having a special serenity about it, reverent and peaceful. Father Steve gathered us together, and for the first time we sang “Christos Anesti” and did liturgical prayer together, our voices mingled and echoed throughout the church in a heavenly choir. We felt as if we had transcended this mere mortal existence to join all those who had worshipped here for over a millennium in praise of the Resurrection of Christ.

On to Delphi. I was particularly excited about visiting this site, as it crops up again and again in ancient literature I have read. Unfortunately, the museum was closed for renovation...but the ruins were open. As we walked through the ruins of this astonishing, world famous temple of Apollo, I couldn't help but think again of how much Christianity had impacted the world. People made pilgrimages to consult the god through the Oracle as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.!! My mind simply could not grasp the sheer size and strength of these ruins, let alone the thousands of years that have passed – and they still stand! Although there were clearly marked paths, no one stops you from running your hands along the ruins. As in the case of the Parthenon, Christianity ‘redeemed’ this site and the remnants of a basilica remain at the entrance, with the signs and symbols of Christianity clearly intact, engraved into the marble and stone fragments. Centuries of

pagan rites were literally replaced by Orthodox Christian liturgical worship of the one, true and living God revealed in Jesus Christ.

### **Friday, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Day Five – Meteora / Kalambaka**

Back in the bus, the endless banter in the back is hilarious! Marina's cries of "Holy smoke!" at the site of another roadside shrine always made me giggle. She usually followed the exclamation with a thought about exactly what happened to that car or person the shrine memorialized. In one particular place, it appeared as if the shrine itself had been run over by a car. This brought rolls of laughter. On our way to Meteora we stopped at an icon studio, which was actually an icon painting school. It was founded by a married priest with three children who was training several painters. We were given a tour of the shop by Kiki, the sister of Father Pefkis, and saw how icons are made.

Our first view of the stalagmites of Kalambaka was simply breathtaking. Looking up, it is hard to imagine how anyone could have climbed these mountains. How on earth did those hermits in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century scale these mountains to live in the caves and rocks? As we passed by, little pockets of caves appear within the rocks that excite the imagination. How could they have built these monasteries?



*The Monastery of the Great Meteora  
founded by St. Athanasios of Meteora in the 14<sup>th</sup> century*

The first monastery we visited was the Monastery of the Great Meteora, founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and whose church is named for the Transfiguration of Christ. We climbed many winding stairways to get to the entrance of this impressive monastery, which appears to have been built directly in to and at the top of the rock. Just inside, there were little carved apertures in the stone that held incense burners. I saw another pathway and

ventured toward it, to discover a small room with a double door: the bottom half closed and the top half wide open. Above the door was an icon of the Resurrection. Inside, clearly displayed, were the neatly stacked and carefully labeled bones and skulls of those who had resided in this monastery. I had dreaded this moment, which I knew was bound to come, since I had learned of this practice in Father Steve's 101 class. He taught us that our American culture is one that tends to deny death, and we are all products of that culture. Yet, when I peered in to take a closer look, I realized I was not at all bothered by what I saw! I then recalled him saying that these are those servants who died in hope of the Resurrection; they rest (or sleep) awaiting the Resurrection of their bodies. "You either believe in the Resurrection or you do not," he said. Looking through that door, I believed...

One room of the chapel in the monastery was covered from top to bottom with frescoes depicting with striking gruesomeness the torture and death of many well-known martyrs; Christianity in all its raw truth. Yet this seemingly endless testimony of horror is just a tiny drop in the ocean of saints who have suffered and *still suffer* for Jesus' sake. As I stood there, I wondered if I really knew what it means to be a Christian. Do I really believe? How would I react under the same circumstances? This is a serious contrast to Southern California Christianity. The words of Father Steve, said more than once during my recent journey into Orthodoxy as a catechumen, rang through my soul as I stood in awe and fear: "Truly we stand blessed in the blood of the martyrs." These paintings revealed the martyr's fear and agony, but also the triumph of the Resurrection! For me, this became a moment of eschatological intensity, as I realized these martyrs are truly alive in Christ! They speak to us now through the faithful hands of those who painted these icons. I could not stop the flow of tears. Someone in our group turned to me and said, "Can you believe how cruel and terrible they were?" I answered him, "They still are." He nodded and turned away. I pictured the thousands upon thousands of those martyrs in the book of Revelation who cry out continually, "how long, oh Lord!" St. Paul, too, was a martyr portrayed on this holy wall. I think those who painted these frescoes created them to remind all who enter here that our faith really is a matter of life and death. I moved into the main chapel where the rest of our group, with Father Steve, had begun to sing the liturgical prayers and "Christos Anesti." Finally, we came to *The Monastery of St Stephen the First Martyr*, which is one of two convents at Meteora. We were blessed to get in just before they closed their doors for the day. We headed straight for the chapel, which was simply beautiful. Father Steve again led us in the liturgical prayers and the singing of "Christos Anesti." Everyone in our group loved the nuns in this convent. Sheilagh and Alan wrote, "St. Stephen's, sitting atop a huge monolith rock at Meteora, exuded the sweet fragrance of Christ. During our visit, the nuns exhibited a patient and giving attitude to us. The monastery was immaculate, with beautiful beds of fragrant roses."

### **Saturday, June 4, Day 6 Verioa / Thessaloniki**

We just visited the site where in Veroia where the Apostle Paul spoke to the Bereans (Acts 17:10-15). Standing at the foot of the lovely, mosaic monument, I was once again taken by the fact that he actually really stood here. I read the Scriptures just prior to

arriving, so I had a fresh sense of Paul's purpose in bringing the gospel to these people. We sang "Christos Anesti" and the hymn to St. Paul in this little open square that housed mosaic icons and the steps he reportedly stood on while teaching. Thanks to this pilgrimage, I don't think any of us will ever again hear the hymn of St. Paul in Liturgy at St. Paul's in Irvine without experiencing a fresh sense of wonder.



*The outdoor monument to St. Paul in Veroia (Acts 17:10-15)*

### **Sunday, June 5, Day 7 - Thessaloniki – Church Day**

Our first stop was *St. David*. I believe that without a doubt this was one of the most truly unique experiences of the entire pilgrimage. The church is a very tiny 5<sup>th</sup> century church situated high above the city in one of the countless neighborhoods that wind through the cobblestone streets. It's a very humble little building, secreted inside a complex hillside district. Once we found the church, every one of us was quieted with a sense of awe. Divine Liturgy had already begun. We would be allowed to enter, two by two, to view a 5<sup>th</sup> century mosaic icon of Christ, depicted as a beardless young man. In the outer courtyard, we were able to light our candles and venerate the icons that stood just before the open door. As we stood near the opening, we could hear the priests and chanters fully engulfed in the prayers and hymns of the Liturgy, their melodic rhythm and reverent songs hanging gently in the bright sunshine of the outer courtyard. There was an eschatological sense of time-full-ness, enhanced by an intense beauty and a holiness that surrounded this place. I entered with Joanne and was captivated by the setting. Subdued light served to contrast the flickering candles. This was a very tiny church, but filled with people, packed into little alcoves and in rows facing the altar. As we were taken to the front, standing before the altar, an old woman stepped out and pointed us to the icon of the beardless Christ in the apse. The mosaic was stunning. As we were leaving, the priests, chanters and congregation began to sing "Christos Anesti." We stopped and sang with them in the outer courtyard. As we walked away, Alan, who is a convert like me,

voiced my thoughts. With tears in his eyes, he quietly said, “Thank God for the continuity!” The Orthodox Church that seems so at odds with American culture has very deep roots in an ancient, historical faith that has stood the test of time. The priests, deacons, monks, nuns, bishops and saints who have stubbornly kept the faith stand as truly a beacon of faith throughout all the troubled ages. How has Christianity survived all these centuries – with all the violence, despair and treachery? How has the light of Christ continued to burn in spite of war and desecration? The answer has to be: through each one of us. One has passed the spark of the burning light of true love to another, who has passed it to us, who now hold the flame in this time and place. The Christians gathered here for Divine Liturgy drew my mind back into the ancient Christian gathering more than anything I have seen. There was a quiet reverence in the soft light of the candle lit chapel, where chants rose like a sweet fragrance to God from the womb of the church, testifying of God’s glory to those all around. We arrived at St. Demetrius’ Cathedral about halfway through Divine Liturgy, where we joined the congregation. This is a majestic church, with a unique mixture of ancient and modern features. This church also had some of the most stunning icons we had seen to this point. St. Demetrius was a Roman military commander and secret Christian who refused the orders of the Roman emperor Maximian to arrest and execute Christians, for which he was eventually martyred in 304 A.D. He is buried on this site, and in 312 A.D. a house church was built over his tomb. This cathedral now stands over the original house, which we were able to go down into after the service. When we first entered the cathedral we immediately went to the upper balcony, heading toward the front near the altar. From where we stood, we were able to see what was taking place behind the iconostasis screen– a rare treat – especially for women! We watched as the priest performed the epiclesis and lead the congregation in the Lord’s Prayer. Father Steve stood next to me and quietly noted that we stood in a church and were participating in a service in the land where the Apostle Paul had preached and in the language in which the New Testament was written, including Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians. At the conclusion of Liturgy, we walked around the interior of the church and I had the opportunity to venerate the relicsof



An icon of St. Gregory Palamas

St. Demetrios and St. Anysia, another early Christian martyr. St. Demetrios’ relics were housed in a very beautiful, tiny chapel. Another church we visited in the afternoon was the Metropolitan Cathedral: built between 1891 and 1914 during the Turkish occupation. This church houses the relics of St. Gregory Palamas (1292-1356), who was a monk of Mt. Athos and later became the Archbishop of Thessaloniki. Father Steve said: “We remember St. Gregory Palamas each year on the second Sunday of Great Lent for precisely his emphasis on the fact that we as human beings can really know and experience God in Christ through the Holy Spirit and not merely know something *about* him.” Many of us venerated his relics! I was very touched being in the presence of this great and humble monk’s relics and was thankful for his defense of our ability to have a personal relationship with a God we can really know. May his memory be eternal and ever blessed!

**Monday, June 6, Day 8 - Thessaloniki / Philippi**



*The site of the prison where St. Paul was held captive in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40)*

The museum at the archeological site at Philippi was closed, but the site itself was open, so we grabbed a few brochures and headed out to explore. By far, the most overwhelming moment for me was to stand before the place where Paul and Silas were jailed. Having read about the story in Acts 16:16-40 many times over the years did not prepare me for my own reaction. All of a sudden, this was not just a story. I was confronted with the reality of what actually took place. Paul and Silas, having just been beaten, were thrown into this very prison that I stood before. As they were praying and singing hymns to God, and earthquake freed them...and the jailer, falling at their feet,

cried out, “Men, what must I do to be saved?” This was a critical moment for me, where – as Father Steve said – my faith took on flesh. I was just as shaken as if I had experienced the earthquake myself. This was no longer just a story; it was no longer an abstract concept. God had miraculously freed Paul and Silas, as well as the other prisoners, on this very spot. I stayed for some time at the mouth of the prison and then walked over to the ruins of the marketplace where Paul had cast the demon out of the slave girl; where he and Silas had been accused, judged and beaten. For the first time, I began to realize Paul’s sufferings. I felt as if everything in the Scriptures was coming alive. St. Paul talks about it and we read about it. But it just didn’t seem that real to me until now. It’s almost as if I can sense his presence, standing at my shoulder.



*The Church of St. Lydia near Philippi (Acts 16:12-15)*

We boarded the bus and headed down the road to visit the place where Paul baptized Lydia. There is a little, white shrine by the stream that marks the occasion. We took Linda’s picture next to the shrine that held an icon of Lydia. There is also a new church and baptistry that had been built in honor of her, close to the shrine. The interior of the church was round and had an exceptionally beautiful mosaic of Christ’s baptism in the dome. We gathered ourselves together and once again sang “Christos Anesti” and the hymn to St. Paul, as Linda stood closest to the icon of Lydia on the iconostasis. This was the last time we could sing “Christ is risen” as the 40 days of celebrating Pascha were coming to a close and we were preparing to celebrate His Ascension on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after His resurrection. This was another very moving experience, where not just St. Paul has come to life, but also St. Lydia.

## **Tuesday, June 7, Day 9 - Thessaloniki / Mt. Athos**

We spotted our first glimpse of Mt. Athos as we drew near the little harbor where we would board our ship. It's a beautiful day. There is a little wind and the water sparkles like diamonds. All aboard, Mt. Athos is now looming ahead, and we are not far from the base of the mountain. As we sailed alongside the island, we viewed several of the many monasteries and hermitages that seemed to cling to the edge of the rocks, as well as the monasteries that rested peacefully just above the shore. I felt very blessed to be so close to this holy place of prayer. We had lunch in Ouranopolis at a little outdoor restaurant situated not far from where the boats load and unload passengers. While we were eating, I saw a number of monks and several young men scurrying up the road toward a waiting bus. Having just arrived by boat, they were beginning their journey to the Holy Mountain. Most carried backpacks and books – but not much else. My heart wandered up the road with them, wondering where the Lord would lead them. What is in store for each of them? Will some of them be saints and holy men? Too late, I grabbed my camera, hoping to get a picture of their backs as they quickly moved through the crowded street to board the bus.

## **Wednesday, June 8, Day 10 - Athens**

Today, upon leaving Thessaloniki for Athens, I'm reading St. Paul's *Letters to the Thessalonians*. I will never be able to read those letters in quite the same way again. Having actually visited many of the locations has somehow made it easier to grasp the context. I can picture St. Paul writing to the churches in these cities, knowing the people. I now have an entirely different perspective when I read the Scriptures. When the Apostle Paul speaks of the Thessalonians and the Philippians, all these places and situations are no longer distant. Somehow the chasm in the 2,000 year gap between then and now has been radically reduced. These letters still speak to the people of Thessaloniki today, people we are meeting here and now, the descendents of those who originally received them. I feel I can connect the dots. His message to the churches came from a personal and Spirit-filled concern that extends through time to those same churches today. Even more, we in America, as well as others throughout the entire world, receive the encouragement and exhortation that was first written to these churches. Realizing this has indeed added more "flesh and bone" to my faith. We are the body of Christ – past, present and future – having been sealed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This evening, while out for dinner in Athens, we once again passed by the oldest church we visited on our first day in Athens, the *Church of Kapnikarea*. The Theotokos still looks out from over the top of the entrance, as she has for many centuries, inviting all to receive the Christ. To the right of her, seated on the rocky ledge that surrounds the little church, a young couple is kissing. In the center, two girls enjoy a late dinner. To the far left, a man is lying in a fetal position, covered by a blanket – unconscious of the loving protection and hope of all the ages that the Panagia offers. A half bottle of beer stands just within his reach, undisturbed by wandering pedestrians. A dog has somehow tangled its foot in a piece of rope attached to the man. As I walk by, the dog frees himself. Oh that the man might look up and receive the Offering of Christ! Reflecting on the scene, it seems a perfect summary of our visit to Greece. This land of the church that Paul

established and dearly loved was raised up in a desperate, destitute, sexually immoral culture. Our human condition is still the same, but Jesus came to offer Himself in love to us. In His great compassion, He heals us, regenerates us and offers all the blessings of the Kingdom of His Father. This little church stands in the midst of all our frail, human need – some 1500 years later – still ready to receive those who will just look up.

### **Thursday, June 9, Day 11 - Rome / The Colosseum – Mamertine Prison**

We are sad about leaving Greece, but looking forward to Rome. What must Paul have felt as he headed for Rome? I was reminded of his last visit to Ceasarea, when the prophet Agabus came to him from Judea. He took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered and said, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 21:10-13) We learn by reading the remainder of Acts that Paul was indeed delivered over to the Gentiles and shipped to Rome to be brought before Caesar. Paul knew he would most likely die in Rome, but went fearlessly toward the completion of God's will. Most of the 'prison epistles' of Paul were written while he was imprisoned in Rome (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon).

We boarded our bus for the Colosseum, the Flavian Amphitheatre. I think the experience was different for me than others on our team. At the first glimpse of this monument I was filled with dread. I didn't see just the immense ruin and the amazing structure. In my mind's eye, I saw, heard and felt the violence displayed here in all its horror. The summary Father Steve provided states, "Slaughter was an important part of Roman entertainment. At its 100-day inauguration ceremonies, over 2,000 men and 9,000 wild animals were killed. Slaves would squirt perfumes around the stadium to help mask the stench of so much blood. The Colosseum could accommodate as many as 50,000 people and the "games" were always free..." My mind simply cannot comprehend the incessant shedding of blood, both human and animal, that took place here for the sheer sake of amusement. Even as I looked around, I was gripped by a heightened awareness of the suffering of Christians who had been martyred here. The icon of St. Ignatius being consumed by lions in the Colosseum flashed before my eyes. I could see young mothers, trying to protect their children, while crowds lusted for their blood in the stadium seats high above. I shuddered at the thought of the thousands of people who came to the 'games' to satiate an inhuman desire for violence. I wept for all who lost their lives here.



*The Colosseum or, more correctly, the Flavian Amphitheatre in Rome*

We walked away from the Colosseum and past the Arch of Constantine toward the Roman Forum. We walked through the forum, astonished by the many remarkable remnants of the ancient empire. We continued walking slowly through the streets and came to the Arch of Septimius Severus, where the Mamertine Prison lies just beyond. This is the cell where the Apostles Peter and Paul were held shortly before their executions. We walked down a staircase to the first memorial in the prison, where we were confronted with the pillar that Peter and Paul had been chained to. An upside down cross appears on the monument, signifying Peter's death. As Father Steve wrote, "To understand this prison—and ancient Roman prisons in general—imagine people chained up, often tortured, amid fat rats and rotting corpses, awaiting their own death." It was not difficult to imagine. I called to mind Paul's final word to the Colossians: "Remember my chains." (Colossians 4:18) I will never read this again without thinking about St. Paul chained and suffering in this prison. What did Paul feel, as he waited? He knew that as a Roman citizen, he would be beheaded. Did he have any last-minute doubts? Was he afraid? After all, even with all the suffering he had already endured and the great blessings he had received from God, Paul was still human, and he was probably very much afraid. One thing we know for sure: his faith was greater than his fear, and his love for God was greater than his love for his own life. This example of his faith stands as a final, wordless exhortation – a word of faith given by a father to his children, many of who would follow him to their own martyrdom.



Standing in front of the bust of Constantine

## **Friday, June 10, Day 12 - Rome / The Vatican-Sistine Chapel – St. Peter’s Basilica**

I think each of us have probably apologized for something to someone at least once on this trip. We are learning to love one another, care for each other and look out after each other in new ways, fulfilling the command of the Lord to love one another. Today was a good example. Before we actually entered the Vatican museum and Sistine Chapel, we ‘cats’ were straying. But once inside, it was difficult to stay together. The museum was very crowded and very large. To complicate things, there is so much to observe, each one of us with our own special interests. Father Steve would fall back to the slowest, then try to lead the group from the front. This became especially difficult when our tour guide left us. Poor Father! In this museum you look up, down, sideways – there is not a single place you can view that doesn’t challenge your mind and your senses. It would take a week to go through the entire place and really see all that is there. We stopped for lunch at a little Vatican cafeteria. All of us decided it would be good to make one last stop at the bathroom. Linda commented that by this time we probably know more about bathrooms that we do about St. Paul the Apostle! We all reconvened at the cafeteria and did a head count, but found George was missing. We searched everywhere, but couldn’t find him. It is very easy to misplace a person in such a vast, crowded place. Father had gone back to the bathroom, searching stall by stall. (We later saw this as pretty funny – once we knew George was okay.) We contacted the Vatican Museum’s police. Martha, God bless her, speaks Italian, so we were able to communicate the problem. Selia and Marina stayed behind while the rest of us went on to see St. Peter’s Basilica. But we were all so worried about George. This drew us all closer together. Many of us prayed throughout the rest of the afternoon.

We walked back through the exhibits and the Sistine Chapel to *St. Peter’s Basilica*. Everything in reality is magnified, over and above anything that can be photographed or videotaped. I realized I’d never seen any representation that could do justice to this extraordinary church. Father Steve walked us all over to a large, marbled circle in the middle of the floor not too far from the entrance and explained that the crowning of Charlemagne took place here...a significant event that contributed to the eventual schism between the Orthodox and Catholic churches. I notice a catch in my throat, as I realize this is where St. Peter died and where he was buried. This church sits on the same ground where Nero’s Circus once performed its hellish rites. There are, predictably, massive signs of papal authority everywhere. The keys and the crown are embroidered in gold and marble in the walls, on the ceilings over portraits and sculpture. Every corner, wall, ceiling and alcove contains a treasure worthy of awe and contemplation. The dome is simply beyond description. We headed down the stairs to view the tombs of the popes. The monument to Peter was stunning, and it contained a Byzantine icon of Christ. We paid our respects to Pope John Paul II, as we quietly filed past his tomb. We herded ourselves back upstairs for one final and very important treat: we actually stood before the *Pieta* of Michelangelo. We returned to the bus to find Selia and Marina informed us that George had returned to the hotel. We were all SO relieved!



*The Dome of St. Peter's Basilica*

### **Saturday, June 11, Day 13 - Rome / Tour of Churches and Catacombs**

All four of the churches we visited are presided over by the Bishop of Rome. Following are just brief notes of a few that we saw: *Santa Prassede*: This church was founded in 822 A.D. by Pope Paschal I and decorated in Byzantine mosaics. The mosaics were incredible. This church contains the Chapel of St. Zeno. Father Steve described it as a “mosaic jewel-box.” There was a surprise alcove in this room that contained a remnant of the whipping-post that Christ had been tied to that had been brought from Jerusalem. *San Clemente*: Straight from Father Steve’s notes: “It is a 12<sup>th</sup> century Christian Basilica, that sits atop a 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian Basilica, that sits atop a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Temple dedicated to the ancient pagan warrior god Mithras.” We descended into the layers to view the periods. The top layer contained another beautiful Byzantine mosaic. There was a large representation of Father God on the ceiling, which doesn’t seem to be a problem for the Roman Catholics. The second layer contained a remarkable memorial: the tomb of St Cyril! It was Cyril and his brother, Methodios, who brought the gospel to the Slavic peoples. The 3<sup>rd</sup> layer looked like an old city, complete with streets.



*The Church of St. Paul's outside-the walls, where the relics of St. Paul are buried*

*Sao Paolo fuori le Mura (St Paul's Outside-the-Walls)*: This church was built over the cemetery that held the blessed body of St. Paul the Apostle. We had reached the end of our journey. The first church constructed on this site after the legalization of Christianity was built by Constantine in 324 A.D. Each of us walked quietly along the beautiful marbled floors, flanked by massive marble pillars, toward the canopied altar...each one of us absorbed with our own thoughts. This church inspired reverence. As the church was nearly completely destroyed by fire in 1823, much of the ancient basilica was gone. What now remains in its place is deplete of the layers of various artwork claimed by each era we noted in the older churches. Even so, this church sustained a quiet majesty and was a wonderful tribute to the man Christ said would suffer much for His name's sake (Acts 9:15-16). I later heard that Stella, standing in the middle of the church, pondered aloud, "How can anyone come into this place and not want to be a Christian?" On the bus ride back to the hotel, Christina led us in the hymn to St. Paul, a sweet note and a timely tribute:

*Facing danger at sea and fearful persecution, you became a chosen vessel of the Savior.*

*With your sermons you enlightened the nations*

*and to the Athenians you revealed the unknown God.*

*Teacher of the nations, St. Paul the Apostle, protector of us all:*

*Keep us who honor you, safe from every trial and danger.*



*The main altar of the Basilica of St. Paul's outside-the-walls  
beneath which are buried the relics of St. Paul and St. Timothy the Apostles*

### **The Catacombs of St. Callixtus:**

We walked deep into the layers of this 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Christian burial ground. It would be easy to get lost in this labyrinth of open tombs. We stopped by the reproduction of the statue of St. Cecilia, a much-venerated early Christian martyr. The statue was in marble with the fingers of her hand joined in such a way as to signify the Holy Trinity. Just to the left of her was a faded 8<sup>th</sup> century icon of Christ as the Pantocrator. The most captivating and encouraging thing I noticed were the many ancient Christian signs and symbols: the fish, the shepherd with the lamb, the icons, the XP monogram and the dove. Along the tops, backs and sides of the family crypts were paintings of people praying, being baptized, attending the Lord's Supper. The bridge between then and now has been crossed once again.

### **Sunday, June 12, Day 14 - Rome / St. Theodore & The Pantheon**

While our pilgrimage 'officially' ended at the burial site of St. Paul, our pilgrimage begins afresh today with the work St. Paul began: we celebrate the Eucharist today!

Beautiful little St. Theodore! So small, quaint and unobtrusive; there is no blatant display of papal wealth and power here. The church was given to the Greek Orthodox in 2000 as an ecumenical gesture by Pope John Paul II. It is clean and bright with marble floors and a short iconostasis screen. The 6<sup>th</sup> century mosaic of Christ, St. Peter and St. Theodore in the apse drew my attention again and again, as Divine Liturgy unfolded and engaged us in the Eucharistic celebration. It was so good to see and hear Father Steve in the liturgy, which was conducted in Greek, Italian and English! We came early for Orthros, which was an hour and a half hour long. The chanters were spectacular and sounded heavenly. I noticed barely discernable Latin letters around the curve at the bottom of the apse. It looked as if an effort had been made to cover them up during the restoration period. It is very faint, but a reminder of the very recent past. The other celebrant, Father Epiphanius, the priest of this little church, was a priest-monk from Mt. Athos who has been serving here for a year. The congregation invited us to enjoy a light dessert.

### **Monday, June 13 - Day 15 – Home to St. Paul’s**

Home! As we pulled in front of St. Paul’s, we noticed the new education building was on its way up, a vision of the future in action. Perhaps St. Paul’s will still be here in 1,500 years, unless the second coming of the Lord occurs first, and will stand as a testimony of the living faith of the Christians at St. Paul’s. We are the ones now holding out the flame of faith to future generations of Christians. Thinking back to what many in our team hoped to learn from this pilgrimage, I would have to say that those desires were more than realized. We did learn to put flesh and blood and bone on our faith. We learned that St. Paul was a real, live man whose travels and sufferings for the sake of the gospel are historical events that really happened. We grew to appreciate the sacrifice he – and many other saints and martyrs made, and we have grown in our understanding of them. Last, we saw that our Orthodox faith is deeply rooted in early Church history. Our churches still stand as a testimony to that continuity, closing the gap between the ancient and modern.

But we also learned something we did not anticipate. The icon over the entrance to our sanctuary shows St. Paul holding out the command: “Make love your aim” (1 Corinthians 14:1). The Scripture around the dome inside our church exhorts us to love one another. This trip made us a family: it taught us to love one another. Linda’s statement on our first Sunday back says it all, “Why am I so ridiculously happy to see everyone?”



**Front:** Linda Hewitt, Martha Murry, Stella Chavos, Marina Kookootsedes, Father Steve, Christine Harrison, Denise Leara and Nanette Bowman. **Back:** Alan & Sheila Means, Joanne Petas, Sheryl Martello, Selia & George Poulos, Mel Bowman. **Standing at the doors of St. Paul's outside-the-walls in Rome.**

