

Item #57 (Greece and Scripture)

In Items #52 and #53 I have presented a view of my summer excursions into Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (Item #52) and Iraq, Iran and Turkey (Item #53). In these excursions I came to appreciate to a limited but real extent what must have been the knowledge in extra-biblical and even biblical cultures by the participants of those cultures. In Item #54 I added my visits to Israel to this list, where the biblical background was more focused and more directly relevant to Holy Scripture. In Item #55 I inserted my message of resignation as a reviewer for the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* to indicate the extent of the purchase on my soul of what I am discussing on this website. In Item #56 I presented a summary of my Holy Week pastoral work in Italy during my 50 years of scholarly activity at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, with emphasis on how I learned from experience that such scholarly activity should have a religious relevance if it is to be genuinely Scriptural. In what follows, Item #57, I shall outline my experience of life in Greece. Such an outline has helped me appreciate the underlying relevance of Reason on my life based on Revelation.

June 22 – July 2, 1962. During the summer of 1962 I had my first sojourn in Israel along with another Jesuit from my province. We were on our way to a summer of study in Israel (see Item #54), and decided to travel from Italy to Israel by ferry, with a brief stay in Greece on the way. During this brief stay we saw a number of standard sights. For example, the Acropolis, Delphi, Salamis, Olympia, Nauplion, Mycenae, Corinth, the Corinth Canal. The Acropolis fully met our expectations as an example of the chaste beauty of classic Greek architecture. Delphi far exceeded our expectations by reason of the stunning landscape in which it was set, high upon a forested hill. In the ruins of Corinth only a small part of the ancient city had been excavated, but what had been excavated was overpowering in its simplicity. It was the Roman forum, with the *bema* (tribunal) on which the proconsul Gallio sat, and before him and below him, some 15 feet a way, was a small circle in the marble pavement in which St. Paul was standing (*Acts of the Apostles* 18,12-17). All quite clear before us. We also managed to visit the community of Greek Jesuits in the center of Athens. All of this was carefully noted by the present writer before he departed for Israel.

August 31, 1989 – May 29, 1990. During the three academic years 1986-1989 I served as the Dean of the Biblical Faculty of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. This was in addition to my other assignments as professor of Introductory Greek, director of the Propaedeutic Year, director of a yearly seminar, editor of various publications and various pastoral responsibilities. In the context of my advancing years (66-68) this left me exhausted. I had never had a sabbatical year and this seemed the appropriate time to request one. The rector of the time at the Institute was not in favor of my request, but his superior thought otherwise, and as a result I was able to enjoy the one biblical land that I had not come to know

to any degree: Greece. I received permission for spending my sabbatical “year” (= 10 months) there in the spring of 1989 and quickly made contact with the Jesuit superior of the house in Athens. The plan was to use this house as a base and to explore the country from there. Greece was not as expensive a place to live in as Italy, so the resulting sojourn would not prove as expensive as it might at first seem. I passed the entire period in Greece (except for Holy Week and Easter, when I took a ferry for Italy and worked in a parish in the Diocese of Lucera, and a few days back in Rome for business and a few days in Romania to visit Biblical Institute alumni after the fall of Communism there).

I used my stay in Greece mainly to get acquainted with ancient Greek culture. About which below. But I also served as a chaplain at the United States Air Force base in Helenikon near Athens and as a chaplain for Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity in Greece (mainly in Athens). And I helped out on occasion at the Jesuit parish in Athens. I celebrated Mass regularly in modern Greek in the Jesuit parish in Athens (which also served as a residence for a number of Catholic young men attending universities in Athens) and even gave a homily in Greek in the parish church one Sunday when the Jesuits were away voting in their place of birth, usually on one of the Catholic Greek islands.

My ability to speak modern Greek was minimal, but my ability to speak English, German and Italian saw me through. Most of the Greek Jesuits had studied in Sicily and spoke Italian, and that was the language I spoke in community. My need to contact the government was minimal, but when it was necessary I was surprised how bureaucratic it was. To register as a resident alien I had to get 11 signatures to the appropriate offices in the appropriate agency in Athens! And to pick up a parcel from the post office I had to sign 5 documents.

I was told that the attitude toward more friendly ecumenical relations were just the opposite for Greek Orthodox (the vast majority) and Roman Catholics (the small minority): Greek Orthodox clergy against, Greek Orthodox laity for; Roman Catholic clergy for, Roman Catholic laity against. My experience, limited, tended to bear this out

Getting Acquainted with Ancient Greek Culture in Greece. I am not and never have been a professional classicist, though I read Church Latin and New Testament Greek regularly and have taught New Testament Greek to many students. But some of the early leaders of the Church (for example, St. Paul) and many of the Christians in the early centuries (for example, the Greek Fathers) were familiar with ancient Greek culture. With my sabbatical “year” in Greece I hoped to delve more deeply into

culture in the place where it existed and where it is best preserved in its physical remains. (Many such remains also exist in museums in a variety of countries, of course.) The museums of Greece are excellent. The National Museum was only a few blocks distant from the Jesuit residence where I had my base. I visited it on several occasions. Greek vases were a particular attraction. Meditating on the stories from classical Greece vases with the aid of a guide book was a good way to enter into the Greek mentality. The American School was another source of insight. When not traveling outside of Athens I often spent a morning there reading up on Greek history, art and literature. The Acropolis, of course, with its well-preserved remains of temples of various sizes, was a constant attraction. Both the library and the Acropolis were within easy walking distance of the Jesuit residence.

The Christian relevance of the Areopagus, a low hill adjacent to the Acropolis, is well known, of course (see *Acts of the Apostles* 17,16-33). The present Areopagus is much as it was in St. Paul's time, and was an obvious place for meditation. The Athenian *stoa* nearby was disappointing in its simplicity, but I could easily imagine, as I walked in it, St. Paul having there encounters which are not recorded in Scripture.

Another Pauline site that I found intriguing by way of contrast with classic Greek culture was Philippi. Philippi today is a ruins, some preserving well antiquity, in the northwest corner of Greece, difficult of access by public transportation. I was able to go there because of an invitation from the priest who was the acting administrator of Thessaloniki (Saloniki) for the Catholic Church (the city was the largest city in Europe without a Catholic bishop). He offered to drive me in his personal car to the ancient site of Philippi, quite a distance east from Thessaloniki. I was in Thessaloniki after a visit to Romania. When that was over the two of us celebrated Mass and then headed east on roads high above the Aegean Sea to the south. We had lunch in the ruins of Neapolis and then finally reached Philippi in early afternoon. We immediately went to the site of the conversion of Lydia and her household (see *Acts of the Apostles* 16,11-15). I imagined a dirty stream wedged in between modern buildings, Instead it is today much as it must have been when Paul arrived, a stream of cold, clear mountain water about 10 feet wide rushing between banks 12 feet high. A ledge in the stream makes possible baptisms today. There is a modest Greek Orthodox church, a small Greek cemetery, a small parking lot, and fields with growing crops. The baptism site is about 100 yards from the ruins of the city. We also visited the site of the prison where Paul and his companion Silas were thrown (see *Acts of the Apostles* 16,16-40) and prayed silently.

Once I took advantage of a bus that went from Athens to Olympia, the site of the first Olympics. Visitors were allowed to walk on the site of the athletic competitions themselves which must have been exactly then as they are today. But the buildings involved were numerous and for the most part have disappeared. There was a small but well designed museum. (When I was gazing at the displays I heard the shouts of a Japanese visitor. He had decided to rest a bit by sitting on a bench facing an exhibit, and had placed his expensive camera next to him. But a thief had managed to come and grab it and was running to the exit. I was unable to find out if the act of thievery succeeded or not.) I took the same bus to return to Athens, arriving in the early morning of the next day. But it was an intriguing glimpse into the life of Athens in the classic period.

The Peloponnesus was a tempting goal for anyone interested in classic Greece, for in the Peloponnesus was the city of Sparta. I visited Sparta with two other persons and to my surprise discovered that it had no defensive walls to speak of. Nor are there many remains of buildings. The reasons for the lack of defensive walls, I was told, were two: 1) the vast, empty area around Sparta, that gave the Spartans ample warning of an invasion, and 2) , the vastly superior nature of the professional Spartan army. (In my pastoral Holy Week in the Diocese of Syracuse in Sicily in the year 2003 I discovered that a sizeable portion of the defense wall of the Athenians against the Spartans was standing, within easy walking distance of the modern city's center.) And, speaking of emptiness, the modern Peloponnesus is still relatively empty. We had to travel miles to find a restaurant, and when we did we found a very good one whose proprietor had worked in Pittsburgh for many years!

And as regards the two great figures of ancient Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, my contact was real but minimal. In Athens I often visited the center for the poor staffed by the Missionaries of Charity, the sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a good half-hour's walk from the Jesuit residence. And very close to this center were the ruins of Plato's Academy. Probably ruins of buildings that Plato himself did not see, but ruins on the site of buildings that he did. As for Aristotle, I managed to get to Stagira, the village where he was born, up north near the border with Bulgaria. Not much to see except for a modest monument in a small park. The surrounding hills were heavily wooded and reminded me of the forests in the Ozarks of my native state of Missouri in the U.S.A.

Not to be omitted is my visit to Mount Athos, for over a thousand years the home of Orthodox monasticism. I was part of a group of about 35 men, mostly Catholic, under the supervision of a Greek Jesuit priest who had been visiting the monasteries for 35 years. Part of our registration involved formally agreeing with the national government of Greece that

we would not say Mass as Roman Catholics while on the grounds of the peninsula. This was a source of great regret for me, that I was forced to miss saying Mass on one day. I succeeded in saying Mass on the first day of our three-day visit very early in the morning of the first day before arriving at our meeting site at the base of the peninsula, and again on the third day by saying Mass after leaving the peninsula late on the third day. There were over twenty monasteries on the peninsula at the time of our visit (April 1990). We visited 12 monasteries as I recall from our base of a sturdy boat. Most of the monasteries we visited had direct access from the sea. Not all monasteries were friendly to Roman Catholics. I recall one monastery with "Orthodoxy or Death" written in huge letters in Greek visible from the sea. But there were more than enough friendly ones to make our visit a pleasant one. Our guide had made friends among the monks as a result of his 35 years of visiting. I recall one monastery where a monk had arrived from Kansas City in the United States unmarried at the age of about 60, having decided that it was time to get serious about saving his soul. (So we were told.) Our guide came with a gift of three jars of Jiffy Peanut Butter that would be sufficient for an entire year, the other monks in the monastery not having acquired a taste for a delicacy that is by no means limited in popularity to the United States. All of our visits left me impressed by the serious approach the monks that we saw had in their religious exercises which they usually allowed us to participate in. And their Christian hospitality and friendliness was impressive. The masculinity of the peninsula is, of course, legendary. Not even hens are permitted residence.

Before we move on to the Greek islands, one anecdote merits telling. The street outside my third-floor room was quite narrow so that the apartments opposite were quite close. As I shook out the dust mops after cleaning my room I frequently was quite close to ladies across the street on the third floor of their apartment houses. My puzzle: should I greet these ladies when I saw them or not? I asked the Jesuits and they were not sure. But I and they did not want to be accused of alienation of affection. Finally we arranged for a group of five or six ladies of the parish to deliberate on the matter. They did not think the question useless. Finally, after some minutes of deliberation, they agreed that I could wave at one of the afore-mentioned ladies if said lady waved first to me.

Most of the ancestors of Roman Catholics in Greece come from two small islands in the Aegean not far south and east of Athens: Syros and Tenos. The Catholic population of these islands dates back to the influence of the Venetians in their commercial enterprises in the eastern Mediterranean that go back deep into the Middle Ages. Most of the Jesuits in the community in Athens came from one or the other of these islands. I

visited these islands by ferry from the Piraeus, the port of Athens. But, of course, these two islands were only two small portion of the magic treasure of Greece scattered in the Aegean.

Geographically speaking, the largest Greek island in the Aegean is Crete. I spent six days there as a guest oi three Capuchin priests who were responsible for the pastoral care of the few Catholics on the island, which is home to about a half a million persons, most Greek Orthodox. Their main base was Herakleion, a city of about 150,000 at the time. From there they motored to Khania, 100 miles to the west, and Rethymnon, midway between. I visited these cities, the mountains to the south, and several excellent museums. Crete is noted for its early Greek presence at Knossos, today marked by the ruins of a famous palace on the outskirts of Herakleion. The Minoan presence dates principally from 2800 B.C. to 1100 B.C. The palace had hundreds of room, some still unexcavated when I was there. with superb wall paintings that look as they had been finished the day before I came. Another memorable experience in Herakleion was my visit to the tomb of Nikos Kazantzakis on the roof of the western entrance bastion to the city. He was the author of *Zorba the Greek* and many other tales of Greek life. The Greek inscription on his grave (all alone, with no other grave anywhere near) is (my translation): "I hope for nothing. I am afraid of nothing. I am free". Not exactly Christian. Quoted here not for imitation. I traveled to the southern mountains by bus and hitchhiking, and thereby met many "ordinary" citizens who were very friendly.

Another memorable experience in Greek island-hopping occurred in my visit to Delos, a tiny island famous for its many remains from classical Greek times. I was particularly interested in visiting what some scholars claim is the oldest known synagogue dating from well before the Christian era. The catch was that Delos had no facilities for visitors and could be approached by ferry only from Mykonos, an island famous for its vacation lodgings only for the wealthy. I decided I would trust in Divine Providence and so arrived in Mykonos in the evening. There were a number of persons who arrived with me, and they all rapidly made arrangements for overnight lodging. I remained forlornly alone with my Roman collar as my only attraction. One owner of a lodging came to me and said in English, "Twenty dollars?" Divine Providence had come through! He didn't even check my passport but I was able to find some edibles at a nearby grocery story for supper and breakfast and had a good night's sleep. The next morning the ferry to Delos eventually took off after strong wind from the north ceased and I arrived in Delos with others. Armed with a detailed map I found myself in a pen of goats. It was not clear who was more surprised, the goats or I. But eventually I found the

ruins of the synagogue, a large oblong room marked by the foundations and seats secularly anchored to them, just as for modern synagogues I had visited. And in the center, in the place of the presider, in red stone contrasting with the beautiful grey stone of the other seats, the “Chair of Moses”. The door to the outside was only a few feet from the water of the Aegean, which was probably higher then than when the synagogue was in use. It took me a while to absorb the implications of what I was seeing, but when I had finished I prayed for all my Jewish friends and all those who had made this visit possible, above all Divine Providence.

Back to Athens. Then, on Tuesday, May 29, I was safely deposited in Fiumicino, the principal airport of Rome, by Alitalia. My sabbatical was over.

What Follows? Above is an impressionistic presentation of my rather extensive contacts with contemporary Greece and my attempts to get insights into the classic Greek philosophical culture that produced Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies. I am a believing Roman Catholic and this means that I have certain beliefs about truth as regards reality and what constitutes legitimacy in the sphere of human action. The Greeks at the time of Aristotle and Plato had the same use of reason that I have, but without the advantage, as I see it, of my Christian faith. For as I see it my faith as a Christian illumines my insight (based on my studies as a student of philosophy): “in Your Light we see light” (*Psalms* 36,10). In the Light of what You have revealed to us, we can see the light of reason and understand better (reason) what we believe (faith). Viewed from another perspective, some things we believe and act on are the same things we understand and act on. For example, the evil of murder. As a Christian I can impose on non-believers conduct based on the evil of murder even though I believe this through my faith because it is something I understand by my reason. But I cannot expect a non-Christian to believe and act on the mystery of the Trinity because I know this only by faith and not also by reason.

As I sat at my desk in July of 2020 reading my letters about my experiences in Greece 30 years ago and reflecting on my many classes in philosophy as a young man and my many meditations on the implications of what I believe by faith and what I know by reason, I can’t avoid the realization that my visits to Greece and surrounding lands have been an unmixed blessing.

One set of truths keeps suggesting itself as a paradigm. In 2004 the Vatican published a document that contains in Chapter 4 the outline of the principles that ensure success in any organized community. The document was researched by a group of scholars studying the Scriptures and the

documents of the popes and various dicasteries. In brief here are the principles. The basis is the respect due to the human person. On this foundation are the organizing principles of the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. Informing this basis are the values of truth, freedom and justice. All of which is designed to issue in love as the bond of human affairs, no matter what the organization. It takes no leap of the imagination to see what a difference this framework would make if applied to public life in the United States. It does not imply that differences of opinion are not allowed. But it does imply standards of civility in expressing them. For me Paul Ryan, the Republican representative from Wisconsin who guided the United States House of Representatives for a term was an example of the use this framework. Does this mean that he was imposing his religious beliefs on others who did not share these beliefs? As explained above, I do not think so. For the framework is not something that can be arrived at by faith alone. It could be arrived at by someone with a well-tuned sense of what is appropriate in dealing with one's fellow men. But Mr. Ryan's Catholic faith helped him to see that this framework was objectively appropriate in dealing in society with others as the shrewdest of thinkers could realize on his or her own. **(July 7, 2020)**