

Pope John Paul II's Voyage in The Footsteps of Saint Paul

by Elisabeth Hellenbroich

During May 4-9, Pope John Paul II started a second pilgrimage, "as a pilgrim in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul," the main stations of which were Greece, Syria, and Malta.

Against the background of the worsening political strategic situation in the Middle East, this Papal trip marks a milestone in the "Dialogue of Cultures"—the rapprochement between the Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as substantial progress in the Muslim-Christian dialogue. Instead of Harvard Prof. Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" and religions, the Pope reaffirmed the idea of St. Paul and Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa of "peace among faiths," of "love," and of "dialogue among peoples."

In Athens, the first stop of his trip, before the Areopagus where nearly 2,000 years ago the Apostle Paul—having been converted suddenly in Damascus from a blind and hateful persecutor of Christians, into a believer in the crucified and resurrected Christ—had addressed the citizens of Athens, the Pope, together with the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, his Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of all Greece, made a joint address. Preceding the declaration was a private meeting, in which they discussed, among other things, the upcoming trip of Archbishop Christodoulos to Patriarch Aleksii II of the Russian Orthodox Church. By making reference to the ideas and words of St. Paul, the representatives of both churches reaffirmed their passionate desire for unity and reconciliation among Christians.

From the side of the Greek Orthodox Church, originally a lot of skepticism and resistance had been expressed against the Papal visit. The Pope had been invited by Prime Minister Costas Simitis of Greece, when the latter had visited the Vatican. However, the personal encounter between Archbishop Christodoulos and the Pope, against all expectations, took a different turn.

In Athens, the Pope did something very unusual: He apologized to the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church and asked pardon for the sacking of Constantinople, which was committed by the Crusaders in 1204 under the leadership of Venice against the Byzantine Greeks. (Venice had used the Fourth Crusade in 1204 to become the major power in the eastern Mediterranean.) The wounds, as the Pope explained, could only be overcome and healed by the "spirit of mutual love,"

and by each side admitting the mistakes and crimes which it had committed in the past.

The Platonic Hellenic Heritage

Paving the way toward "unity," as the Pope reiterated during his speeches, means that Europe must become conscious of that common spiritual heritage of all Christians in East and West. "We are in a decisive period of European history and I hope most fervently that the Europe now emerging will rediscover this long tradition of encounter between Greek culture and Christianity in fresh and imaginative ways, not as the vestige of a vanished world, but as a true basis for the genuinely true progress that our world seeks," he said, during the official welcoming ceremony for him at the Presidential Palace in Athens on May 4.

Invoking the missionary travels of Paul, John Paul said: "Now it is to Greece that I come as a Pilgrim in the footsteps of St. Paul, whose mighty figure towers over the two millennia of Christian history and whose memory is forever etched in the soil of Greece. It was here in Athens that Paul founded one of the first communities of his voyages in the West and of his mission on the European continent. . . . And how could we not recall that it was here in the city of Athens, that there began the dialogue between the Christian message and Hellenistic culture, a dialogue which would decisively shape European civilization?"

While the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, had a great influence in antiquity, and while the New Testament was written in Greek, the early Christians, as the Pope underlined, drew upon Greek culture in order to transmit the Gospel message, which led to the "emergence of Christian Hellenism throughout the Mediterranean world."

"Reading the learned writings of Augustine of Hippo and Dionysius the Areopagite, we see that Christian theology and mysticism drew elements from the dialogue with Platonic philosophy," the Pope said. "Writers like Gregory of Nazianzus," steeped in Greek rhetoric, were able to create a Christian literature worthy of its Classical antecedents. Gradually then, the Hellenic world became Christian and Christianity became, to a certain extent, Greek. Then there came to birth the Byzantine culture of the East and the Medieval culture of



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the West, both deeply imbued with Christian faith and Greek culture. . . . Raphael’s painting *The School of Athens* in the Vatican Palace makes clear the contribution of the school of Athens to the art and culture of the Renaissance, a period which led to a great exchange between Classical Athens and the culture of Christian Rome.”

The Pope gave special emphasis to the Platonic method of education by saying: “Hellenistic culture is characterized by its attention to the education of the young. Plato insisted on the need to train the mind of the young to seek the good and the honorable, as well as to respect the principles of divine law. How many Greek philosophers and writers, beginning with Socrates, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, invited their contemporaries to live ‘in accordance with the virtues.’ Saints Basil and John Chrysostom did not neglect to praise the value of the Greek educational tradition, for its concern to develop the moral sense of young people and to help them to choose freely what is good. . . . The inculturation of the Gospel in the Greek world remains an example for all inculturation.”

Such an extraordinary statement in defense of the Platonic-Christian legacy has not been made by a Pope in centuries, at least not since the time of the Council of Florence in 1439, which, having been significantly shaped by the ideas of the great Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, marked the beginning of

the Renaissance. Theologians and scientists, coming from the East and West for the Council, discussed the principles for a reunification of the churches. The Council itself took place in an atmosphere of passionate scientific debates, where the famous Greek scholar Gemisthos Plethon gave a lecture series on Platonic philosophy.

The Defense of the Common Good

Similarly marked by a “Cusanic spirit” of the Renaissance was the joint declaration of Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Christodoulos, before the Bema of St. Paul, the Apostle to the Nations.

“We repeat with one voice and one heart the words of the Apostle to the Nations,” the joint declaration begins. “I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no ‘schisms’ among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (*I Corinthians 1:10*).

They further condemned “all recourse to violence, proselytism, and fanaticism in the name of religion.”

The declaration stressed that at the center of mutual cooperation in the dialogue between the two churches is the defense of the common good and economic well-being of all men. “Man’s social and scientific evolution has not been accompanied by a deeper delving into the meaning and value of life, which in every instance is a gift of God, nor by an analogous appreciation of man’s unique dignity, as being created according to the Creator’s image and likeness,” the statement said. “Moreover, economic and technological development does not belong equally to all mankind, but belongs only to a very small portion of it. Furthermore, the improvement of living standards has not brought about the opening of men’s hearts to their neighbors who suffer hunger and are naked. We are called to work together for the prevailing of justice, for the relief of the needy, and for the ministry unto those who suffer. . . .

“We are anguished to see that wars, massacres, torture, and martyrdom constitute a terrible daily reality for millions of our brothers. We commit ourselves to struggle for the prevailing of peace throughout the whole world, for the respect of life and human dignity, and for solidarity towards all who are in need.”

The declaration ends with a reference to St. Paul, and stresses that both wish that God direct their way “so that we may increase and abound in love towards one another and towards all men and establish the hearts of all unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all Saints” (*I Thessalonians 3:11-13*).

Historic Visit to a Mosque

The Pope next visited Damascus, the capital of Syria, where he met the residing patriarchs, among them the Greek Orthodox Ignatius Hazim, the Syrian Orthodox Zakka Iwas, the Syrian Catholic Butros Abdelahad, the Chaldean Raphael

Bidawid, the Armenian-Orthodox Narkis Berossian, and the Coptic Stefanos Ghattas, in order to deepen the dialogue between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. But the historic, groundbreaking event was the visit of a Pope to the famous Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

For the first time in the history of Islam and Christianity, a Pope, accompanied by the highest local authority of Islam, the Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Kuftaro, entered the most famous mosque of the Islamic world, the Umayyad Mosque. Two religions which for centuries had been mistrustful and aggressive toward each other, united in a common prayer to the one God.

“We are meeting close to what both Christians and Muslims regard as the tomb of John the Baptist,” the Pope said in his speech in the mosque, “which is the place where also the tomb of John the Baptist is located. . . . The son of Zechariah is a figure of enormous importance in the history of Christianity. . . . For he was the Precursor who prepared the way for Christ. John the Baptist’s life, wholly dedicated to God, was crowned by Martyrdom. He should serve as witness and enlighten all so that they may understand, that life’s great task is to seek God’s truth and justice.”

The Pope put special emphasis on the religious upbringing of youth. “It would be crucial to teach the young the ways of respect and understanding . . . so that they will not be led to misuse religion itself to promote or justify hatred and violence. Violence destroys the image of the Creator in his creatures and should never be considered as the fruit of religious conviction,” he said.

The Pope expressed his hope, that “our meeting in the Umayyad Mosque will signal our determination to advance inter-religious dialogue between the Catholic Church and Islam. It is important that Muslims and Christians continue to explore philosophical and theological questions together in order to come to a more comprehensive knowledge of each other’s religious beliefs.”

A better mutual understanding of the two religions would lead to a partnership for the good of the human family, he said. While the Pope called upon Muslims and Christians to seek forgiveness and offer each other forgiveness for past offenses, he stressed again that which is the common basis for a Dialogue of Cultures: “As members of the one human family and as believers, we have an obligation to the ‘common good,’ to justice, and to solidarity: inter-religious dialogue will lead to many forms of cooperation, especially in responding to the duty to care for the poor and weak.”

At the end of his visit, the Pope visited the Syrian town of Quneitra, near the Israeli-Syrian border on the Golan Heights. During the 1967 war, the town had been captured by the Israelis and totally destroyed, before it was returned to the Syrians in 1974. The Syrians chose not to rebuild it. Here, the Pope offered a prayer for peace in the town’s razed Greek Orthodox church, in which, against the background of the daily escalating violence, he urged Middle East leaders

to work for peace and for the “common good”: “Lord—we pray to you for the peoples of the Middle East. Help them to break down the walls of hostility and division and to build together a world of justice and solidarity. . . . We pray for the civil leaders of this region, that they may strive to satisfy their peoples’ rightful aspirations and educate the young in the ways of justice and peace. Inspire them to work for the common good, to respect the inalienable dignity of every person and the fundamental rights which have their origin in the image and likeness of the Creator impressed upon each and every human being. . . . Lord of Heaven and Earth, Creator of the one human family, we pray for the followers of all religions. May they seek your will in prayer and purity of heart. Merciful Father, may all believers find the courage to forgive one another so that the wounds of the past may be healed, and not be a pretext for further suffering in the present. May this happen above all in the Holy Land, this land which You have blessed with so many signs of Your Providence and where you have revealed Yourself as the God of Love.”

During his departure for the island of Malta, the Pope again made an urgent appeal to the Arabs and Jews, that they engage in building a just peace. Confrontation, the Pope emphasized, has never and will never work. Only a just peace can create the conditions for the economic, cultural, and social development which the peoples of the region rightly need to enjoy.

A Prophetic Gesture in Unusual Times

As a pilgrim in the footsteps of St. Paul, the great teacher of Christianity and architect of European civilization, who made the “theology of love” the most important basis for the spreading of the Gospel and for organizing society, so the Pope has, with his second pilgrimage, signalled very strongly to the world, that in the year of “Dialogue of Cultures,” there can be hope for the future of mankind, if religions and cultures actively engage in a dialogue, concerning their common spiritual heritage and dedicate their cooperative efforts to the defense of the “common good,” the fight for justice, peace, and the economic well-being of all mankind.

As commentator Vittorio Messori wrote in the May 7 issue of the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*, the Pope is “breaking all rules” and expectations in his effort to build a successful ecumenical dialogue. “Starting with the realization that values such as the unity of Christians, dialogue among religions, peace among men, shows they are not making progress by ordinary means, the Pope has decided to force matters. In ‘unusual times,’ like the present, where mankind may plunge into total chaos or build a new Renaissance, the Pope,” Messori writes, is making a “prophetic gesture.” “To the pride of the world he counterposes humility, even the humiliation of the Church. To others’ closedness, the Pope counterposes his openness; to mistrust, he answers with trust; to smallness, with generosity.”