



September 23
The Greek Islands



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My dear Little Flower - co-pilgrims on this journey,

Today, we continue our pilgrimage with St Paul through the Greek Islands.

*"I've been shipwrecked three times,
and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day.
In hard traveling year in and year out, I've had to ford
rivers,
fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes.
I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country,
endangered by desert sun and sea storm,
and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers.
I've known drudgery and hard labor,
many a long and lonely night without sleep,
many a missed meal, blasted by the cold,
naked to the weather.
And that's not the half of it,
when someone gets to the end of his rope,
I feel the desperation in my bones.
When someone is duped into sin, an angry fire burns in
my gut.
If I have to "brag" about myself,
I'll brag about the humiliations that make me like Jesus.
~ 1 Cor 25b - 30 ~*

The Greek Islands hold significant relevance in understanding the Footsteps of St. Paul and offer an enriching connection for Christian pilgrims tracing his missionary journeys. While not all of Paul's major events occurred directly on the islands, they played important roles in his travels (on his personal journey as a disciple of Christ), and broader mission to spread Christianity throughout the Greco-Roman world.

Mykonos

While Mykonos is not specifically mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles or the narratives of St. Paul's missionary journeys, its significance for modern pilgrims like us can be understood through its historical and cultural context within the Cyclades (the group of islands in the Aegean Sea) and its connection to early Christianity in Greece. It is highly possible that Mykonos served as a port and hub for travelers, connecting various islands and cities in the Aegean Sea, including places where St. Paul did preach, such as Ephesus. Mykonos represents the rich cultural and religious traditions of the region that St. Paul encountered. Understanding the local customs, traditions, superstitions and beliefs of these islands like Mykonos provide insight into the challenges Paul faced in spreading the gospel in a diverse and often polytheistic environment.

While we walk around the narrow streets one of the most cosmopolitan of the Greek Islands, we consider how the Christian faith has transformed – gained, as well as lost, these communities over time. We wondered how the town of its present hustle and bustle – at one point in time – once offered a space for prayer, contemplation, and connection with God. On the other hand, pilgrims can focus on the cultural aspect and context that now shape the Mykonos Island. Pilgrims can explore how local customs have evolved and been influenced by Christianity, reflecting on the integration faith and daily realities of life. Inspired by the spirituality of St Paul, and considering the ongoing mission of the Church, pilgrims can engage with the local community, fostering connections and sharing in the experience of faith.

Kusadasi (Near Ephesus, Turkey)

Not a Greek island, Kusadasi (near the ancient city of Ephesus) is often included in pilgrimages to Greek islands due to its proximity and its significance in Paul's ministry. Paul spent considerable time in Ephesus (Acts 19), one of the most important cities in Asia Minor, and in his missionary work. For pilgrims, Kusadasi and Ephesus offer profound insights into Paul's teachings on unity, spiritual growth, and the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:1-16). Unlike in Athens, Paul's ministry in Ephesus flourished as he established a Christian community in a key (major financial) city of the Roman Empire.

Ephesus was also an important part of Asia Minor during the 5th century (431 AD), where the conciliar declaration of the title of Our Blessed Mother, Theotokos (Mother of God), was made.

Patmos

Although Patmos is more closely associated with St. John, the Beloved Disciple, who received the Revelation while exiled there (Revelation 1:9), it is part of the broader Christian journey of apostles and early disciples. Paul and John shared a common mission to spread the Gospel in the Mediterranean world. For pilgrims following in the footsteps of early Christian apostles, Patmos offers a deeper reflection on the hardships and divine revelations received by the early Christians. It also reflects one of the most important spirituality of the Christian traditions: contemplation and eastern monasticism. While not directly linked to Paul, it helps contextualize the broader scope of early Christian missions.

Samos

St Paul and St John shared a common mission to spread the Gospel in the Mediterranean world. And in these two Greek islands, Samos and Patmos played significant roles in the spread of early Christianity. For pilgrims following in the footsteps of early Christian apostles, these islands offer a deeper reflection on the hardships and divine revelations received by the early Christians.

Paul's missionary travels also took him past the island of Samos during his third journey (Acts 20:15). It is mentioned as part of his route while returning to Jerusalem after preaching in the region. For us pilgrims, Samos reflects Paul's continuous movement to share the Gospel, even in brief stops. It shows the determination of Paul and his companions to reach as many communities as possible, reinforcing the idea of evangelization in every opportunity.

Rhodes

On his return from his third missionary journey, Paul stopped briefly at Rhodes (Acts 21:1), an island known for its strategic maritime position. While only a passing stop, Rhodes symbolizes Paul's extensive travels in spreading the Gospel. Its ancient historical context also highlights the challenges early missionaries faced in navigating different cultural and religious landscapes.

In conclusion, while St. Paul may not have visited many other Greek islands directly, several islands in the Aegean Sea were critical for his own transformation journey as a disciple of, and pilgrim for Christ - therefore, his mission also in forming early Christian communities. For pilgrims, the islands represent the spread of early Christianity throughout the Mediterranean and serve as a backdrop for reflection on Paul's arduous mission to preach to the pagan world. Today, many of the Greek islands are places of natural beauty and spiritual reflection, making them suitable for pilgrims to retreat and contemplate the spiritual legacy of St. Paul's life and teachings.

Reading

“From now on we regard no one according to the flesh; even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer. So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:16-17).

Reflecting on St. Paul with Pope Benedict XVI

“St. Paul did not think of Jesus in historical terms, as a person of the past. He certainly knew the great tradition of the life, words, death and Resurrection of Jesus, but does not treat all this as something from the past; he presents it as the reality of the living Jesus. For Paul, Jesus’ words and actions do not belong to the historical period, to the past. Jesus is alive now, he speaks to us now and lives for us. This is the true way to know Jesus and to understand the tradition about him. We must also learn to know Jesus not from the human point of view, as a person of the past, but as our Lord and Brother, who is with us today and shows us how to live and how to die” (General Audience, Oct. 8, 2008).

Prayer

Dear St. Paul, pray that we may have the eyes to see Christ’s presence in our midst and be attentive to our need to be present to him. And hear all the desires of my heart. Amen.

Our Father ...

Hail Mary ...

Glory Be ...

St. Paul the Apostle, pray for us!