Blog
Spirituality



The House of the Virgin Mary, about miles (5 kilometers) from Ephesus, is said to be where Mary lived after Jesus' crucifixion and Pentecost when she was with the apostles. She traveled to Ephesus with the apostle St. John, whom Jesus instructed from the cross to care for his mother. (GSR photo/Gail DeGeorge)



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Ephesus, Turkey — January 17, 2025

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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report editor emerita Gail DeGeorge recently participated in a biblical study tour to Greece and Turkey with Catholic Theological Union.*

Weeks after visiting the ancient places where St. Paul preached, I find myself reflecting on the journey in his footsteps, as his letters to these early Christian communities are read at Masses. This was particularly true during Advent and Christmas, and on the holy day we celebrated Jan. 1, the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.

On some levels, the trip with Catholic Theological Union felt like an immersion course in early Christian history and theology — though without the pressure of exams and term papers and with top-notch accommodations, meals and side trips. Although I have read and studied a lot on my own about this pivotal period of history — one that I am particularly drawn to — seeing the places in person made me admire anew the early Christians who worked with Paul, the apostles and others, particularly the instrumental role of women. They spread the word about "the Way" despite hardships and persecution in the time before faith became a state-sanctioned religion.

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For believers who were Jews, Jesus was the promised Messiah. For the Gentiles, it was a more complicated message. We learned Paul's commitment to take the "good news" to all corners of the world. Paul used Greek poetry, drama, culture, philosophy and even its mythology to preach that there was one God and that Jesus' death and Resurrection was the way to eternal life.

Hearing the site lectures by Sr. Barbara Reid, president of Catholic Theological Union and a noted feminist theologian, provided more than a few surprises and made me eager to learn more. She wove together the major themes, similarities and differences of Paul's letters to each of the communities and the related passages in

the Acts of the Apostles, along with theories of contemporary theologians. With Reid's expertise, it was refreshing to have the importance of women emphasized in the Gospels as well as in Acts and Paul's letters.

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Already on the first day, what I thought I knew was challenged. I knew the letters were written in Greek. But what I should have known and frankly didn't was that none of Paul's original letters have been found: what we have are copies of copies. Seven of the 13 letters — presumably there were more — are considered to be "authentically" written by Paul: the first letter to Thessalonians; the two letters to the Corinthians and the letters to the Philippians, Galatians and Romans, and to Philemon, Reid said, citing other theologians. Authorship of the others is open to debate among some theologians, who think they were penned by his followers. The unsigned Hebrews letter is often ascribed to Paul, though I learned that some scholars say it may have been written by Priscilla, the wife of Aquila.

At each of the sites we visited, we read key passages from the letters, Acts of the Apostles and other scriptures, and offered prayers at the beginning and end of each day. I found myself praying throughout the day, putting myself in the "place" of the early Christians in Thessalonica, Corinth, Philippi, Athens and Ephesus and elsewhere. I was awed by the distances Paul traveled — from Corinth to Ephesus, as one example, took eight days by sea. From Ephesus to Jerusalem was 1,122 miles and to Rome was 1,705 miles.

The distances led to differences in interpretations and pastoral practices, Reid explained, with some clusters of communities having to decide whether to remain under Peter's leadership in Jerusalem or break away. I learned also that some scholars think that while the Gospel of John is commonly attributed to the disciple John, that there may have been as many as three "Johns" writing the texts attributed to him in the Bible.



Mass is celebrated by participants in the Catholic Theological Union Greece-Turkey trip on the grounds surrounding Mary's House. This is a popular place for pilgrimages and study groups to celebrate Mass. (GSR photo/Gail DeGeorge)

"When you read the three letters of John, it's clear that the conflicts became so great that some of them had to break off and go their own separate way," Reid told us. "It's not a monolithic development of our Christian history, and the writings that come from Ephesus give us glimpses into how things developed in those early centuries."

"One last footnote," she continued, "when we're talking about the authorship of the Gospel of John, there are some New Testament scholars who quite strongly suspect that the real author of the Gospel could have been a woman from the way the story is told. We have no way of proving it one way or another and we'll have to find out the answer on the other side of eternity."

The sites that moved and challenged me the most were the House of the Virgin Mary, and Ephesus, which are near each other. We celebrated Mass on the grounds

of the House of the Virgin Mary, where Mary is said to have lived after Jesus' crucifixion and Resurrection. The familiar prayers and responses had a deeper resonance as I meditated about the woman whose "yes" changed the world and allowed the long-awaited Savior to be born.

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The site owes its discovery to Blessed Sr. Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), a bedridden nun of the Augustinian order who never left Germany. She had a vision that the abandoned house could be found near Ephesus, partly hidden in a grove of trees. She provided great details, prompting church officials from Izmir to search for it. Accounts vary but largely credit another 19th century nun, Servant of God Sr. Marie de Mandat Grancey and a Daughter of Charity, with championing efforts to find the house and purchase the land.

Mary is, in my opinion, too often depicted in our Catholic faith as "other worldly" — the Queen of the Angels and the Saints makes her inaccessible to us. I think of her more as a friend and a mother, and I have turned to her countless times in prayer and "conversation" when raising my own two sons — and still do with the challenges they face as young adults.

No doubt Jesus caused Mary plenty of heartache and generated a lot of gossip and raised eyebrows in their hometown of Nazareth. How did she explain to neighbors and friends their early years in Egypt? And having a 30-year-old unmarried son in those times? Jesus performed his first miracle for Mary at the wedding of Cana. I can almost "see" his eye roll when he tells her that it's not his time. But she doesn't berate or guilt trip him; she simply turns to the wine stewards and tells them, "do whatever he tells you." She knew Jesus would come through for her.

At Mary's house, I reflected anew about the pain she must have felt during Jesus' agony and horrible death — a punishment for criminals — despite his miracles of healing and his teachings of love, peace and how to reach eternal life. No doubt he visited her during his 40 days after the Resurrection before the Ascension. She was present at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles and inspired them

to take up their ministry of spreading the word about "the Way." While the Scriptures are silent on this, I believe she must have championed Jesus' message also: What mother wouldn't have?



Candles and written prayer petitions implore the intercession of Mary. The Vatican has designated the site as "Holy Place" and it has been visited by several popes, including Leo XIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. (GSR photo/Gail DeGeorge)

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The House of the Virgin Mary is modest — a few rooms, nothing of grandeur. It's believed that she lived there after traveling to Ephesus with the apostle John, following Jesus' dying admonition to John to care for his mother. Despite some debate whether Mary actually lived there or for how long, the site was recognized in 1896 by Pope Leo XIII as an official place of pilgrimage. Pope Paul VI was the first pope to visit there in 1967, St. Pope John Paul II did so in 1979 and Pope Benedict XVI in 2006.

But the role of the sisters in discovering and saving this site added to my fondness for this particular part of our journey. Particularly touching were the thousands upon thousands of scraps of paper tucked into the wall beside her house, written petitions for intercessions for health, help with exams, troubled children and a litany of other needs. Of course we turn to our Mother for help. I don't know if any of my fellow travelers did, but I added a scrap of paper with my own scribbled requests for family members and friends. At the end, I added a line for special prayers for the women, the sisters, who devote so much of their life to serving others.

This story appears in the **Marian Shrines and Devotions** feature series. View the full series.