

# In Greece, Athens Carmel

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Καλήμέρα, Ελλάδα και Αθήνα!

As soon as one reaches Greece the Mediterranean leaps up before one's eyes: the light is very clear, the sky an intense blue, while the wind blows gently from the north discharging contamination in the sea (There is the same phenomenon with the 'mistral' wind in Marseilles). A vista opens up of sea, pines and olives. Observing the barren limestone mountains near Athens, Greece appears like a land that is burnt up. The trees survive but the grass has disappeared. However, as usual we do not rest on these exterior things.

To the many Greek myths we should add still one more: when the gods created Greece, they gave it history and culture. Greece has been part of the western culture for many centuries. The title 'eastern light' is more than a symbol. It manages to evoke something of the actual reality. Is there another land weighed down with so much history, philosophy, art, theatre and sporting contests,...? Greece dominated the ancient world for a long period of time and the vestiges of this past have remained with us. Where ever we go in this country we encounter stones that speak of history and culture: temples, columns, amphitheatres, ancient town squares... Ancient philosophers like Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and many more after them have enlightened our minds.

'Iliad' and other names like Homer, Esquilo, Sophocles, Medea, Andromache, 'the Trojans' are references which resonate loudly down the history of universal literature. From these ancient times derive columns with various forms of doric or ionic capitals, friezes, tympanums, narthexes, peristyles, cornices and more elements which have for centuries remained the canons or parameters of aesthetics. The dawn of the West is to be found in many areas of Greek history, its roots, its essence and the foundations upon which western thought has been built. There is also the area of medicine, beginning with Hippocrates and then there are the Greek terms in psychology. Persons like Oedipus and Electra incarnate our complexes.

In its more than 1,500 islands Greece was born; it has been shaped by the sea: already from prehistoric times (4,500-2,800 before Christ), from its protohistory (2,800-1,220 B.C.), from its antiquity, from the persian wars with the installation of democracy in Athens. Pardon was evidently present, for example in the 'Magna Grecia' in Italy, in Egypt and in Asia Minor.

The 'Olympic Games' were born as a cult of sport to Zeus. According to a legend the first games were between the gods and the heroes, creating a huge gathering. Officially the Olympic Games were born in 776 B.C., reaching their apogee in 576 B.C. They are celebrated every four years and have lasted for 1000 years without interruption. The games were reinstated in modern times by the Baron of Coubertin in 1896.

Athens, the city of the goddess, was born from the mind of Zeus in the presence of other gods. The Acropolis with the Parthenon (447-432 B.C.) form the summit of the city and its art.

Regarding religion, its polytheism presents special characteristics. Mount Olympus is considered as the 'ceiling of Greece', the firmament of the gods. First of all it calls our attention to a reduced number [of gods]. They are joined by some minor divinities and divinized heroes. Over them all is Zeus, the father of the gods: The god of the sky and the light of day, the one who puts order in the cosmos, guarantees and protects all established rights. The absence or lack of sacred texts is made up for by the mythologies.

Greece is today the fiefdom of the orthodox church. The orthodox creed is also the creed of the state. The orthodox priests – not the monks – are paid as employees of the state. Could this be the reason for the superiority-complex of 11 million inhabitants before the tiny minority of 50,000 catholics? This complex is all too clear to see and obvious. Catholics recognize the sacraments [of the orthodox church], but this is not reciprocated. According to the orthodox church catholics are "heretics without hope of salvation", because "your baptism is not valid". One hears all too often this denigration of the catholic Church. In an amicable and informal conversation with a orthodox monk we had the following exchange:

- How is ecumenism among yourselves?
- *But do you really believe in ecumenism?*
- Yes, of course.
- *You, you latins, have one fialing: you believe when something comes to mind that it really exists.*

- What we have in mind... and in our hearts, is what nourishes us in faith. I abide by the joint statement, recently signed by Pope Benedict XVI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartolomew.

- *But when are you latins going to understand that just because something is written on paper it does not necessarily mean that it is true?*

I was amazed by such an attitude. He continued angry at our error in thinking that the crisis in vocations is due to the fact that priests do not marry. "Among ourselves, he assured me, there are married priests and they are given a good salary by the government. But also in Greece priests leave..." I expressed a desire to visit a monastery. Thanks to the mediation of a monk I was introduced to the monastery of the Holy Spirit in Oropos, about 50 kms from Athens. The 'higumene' insisted that, "If the latin monk [sic] wishes to come and see us then he must wear his habit". It is quite a modern monastery (1963), of 'athonite' (i.e., Mount Athos) obedience, with an 'esikasta' regime. The 20 monks follow the 'julian' calendar, having never accepted our 'gregorian' calendar (1582) as many other monks and monasteries have done. When we deal with these connotations we know we are in a very traditional enviroment, with strict enclosure. I was welcomed into the chapel as far as the iconostasis, which was a real privilege in such a place. However, "out of respect for them" I was not allowed to photograph the icons. From the time of the Turkish empire, in which bells could not be rung, monasteries used instead the 'simandra' to summon the monks to their offices, consisting of a rectangular piece of wood to which metal springs are applied.

A 42 year old monk greeted me with exquisite monastic manners, responded to all my questions, explained to me about monastic life and took me to see some workshops. I was even presented with apricots from the garden. When the time came for me to leave I could not avoid the penalty of my eternal damnation for being a priest and a catholic friar. I heard said that the atmosphere is different on the islands which a long time ago used to be under the influence of Venice, such as Tinos. In any case, I entrusted my salvation to the Lord and remained with a pleasant memory of my meeting in an ecumenical fraternity of a classical monastery with a very puritan tradition.

Greece has recently made a great leap forward towards modernity. They say that it is the effect of belonging to the european community, reinforced by the generous grants for the Olympic Games held there in 2004. Athens and the people come accross well, with an admirable infrastructure of different systems. The sport centres built for the 2004 Olympics are impressive. I visited the capital on the back of a motorbike of my friend Lakis, a passionate member of the Focolari movement.

### *Corinth*

With reference to the Year of St Paul I first of all visited Athens, where I saw the areopagus of the Arcopolis. They told me that I could see the city beneath my feet. However, in this place it is easy to focus on the memory of the apostle to the gentiles, who delivered a learned oratorical discourse to the athenians about the unknown God and of the resurrection (Acts 17:16-33). In this year of St. Paul it is a privilege to find myself now in Corinth, 85 kms from Athens. In front of us was the Egean sea and the Jonio sea in the narrow corridor of Isthmia.

When we arrived at the coast we came across a canal. It was built in the 19th century, inaugurated on October 28 1893. It is an interesting engineering accomplishment, 6,343 meters long and 23 meters wide. By this short passage the Egean sea unites with the Jonio sea and thus ships do not have to skirt all the Peloponesian peninsula which begins here. The modern canal copied the ancient system, the 'diolcos', and improbe on it. It was a 5 kilometer passageway along which, from the 7th century BC, the Greeks used to haul their ships from one sea to the other.

In St. Paul's day the canal did not exist, so what did Paul encounter when he visited the place? In the first place there was the port, by which the corinthians communicated with the mediterranean world. For this reason their way of thinking was much more open than that of the athenians who were imbued with an academic spirit. Paul [in Corinth] came up against a

different kind of people to the Athenians. Among the ruins of the old city (an interesting place for an archaeological visit) the ancient temple of Apollo stands out. It is situated on a plain, at sea level.

Beyond the ruins there rose up a wall of rock. This is the fortress of 'Acrocorinth' with so many ruined buildings and walls. It was a fortress and refuge at the entrance to the Peloponnese. There were late-roman and paleochristian vestiges. Later there came, and for the same strategic reasons, the Byzantines, the Turks and the Venetians.

Chapter 18 of the 'Acts of the Apostles' tells of Paul's work of evangelization in Corinth. Here, one night, he had a vision of the Lord, "Do not be afraid, continue to speak out, nor allow yourself to be silenced: I am with you. I have so many people on my side in this city that no one will even attempt to hurt you...". Paul remained one year and a half in Corinth, teaching the word of God to Jews and Gentiles alike.

A biblical scholar will have time in this place for reflection as well as confirmation that his studies are worthwhile. In Corinth I considered myself a religious tourist, happy and moved to walk on the land which the great apostle Paul of Tarsus came to with his preaching of the word, with the testimony of his life, with his fears, his persecutions, his friendships and his prayers. I almost seemed to hear: "The land on which you walk is holy..." From now on I will read the two epistles to the Corinthians with greater attention.

### *The Carmel in Athens - - 'Ηρακλέων.-*

I have written the title in the original Greek because otherwise the way it is pronounced appears confused to my ears. Sometimes it is pronounced Iraklion and sometimes Heraklion,... Iraklion is a hill in the north of Athens, 15 kms from the city centre, and very close to the modern Olympic sports centre built in 2004. The region began as a dwelling-place for the soldiers that Oton I, the first Greek king of modern times (1830), brought with him from his native Bavaria.

Carmel was established here in 1935, by Greek nuns who came from the Istanbul-Kadikoy Carmelite convent in Turkey. It was dedicated to the Blessed Trinity. The creator and animator of the foundation was the [Catholic] Archbishop of Athens, Mgr. Filipucci, the first foundation of Mother Teresa of Jesus' nuns [in Greece] and with the blessing of Pius XI. With the Poor Clares and the Dominicans it is the third contemplative foundation in the whole of Greece and the only one in Athens.

The structure of this Carmel in Athens needed to be enlarged in recent years. The community grew in numbers with the arrival of sisters from Saint Sever-sur-l'Adour (France). In 2008 it amalgamated with Bergerac Carmel (France), which has allowed it to survive and we hope it will remain in Athens. The transfer from the city of Cyrano in France to Athens was an act of deep faith. The infirm, elderly and young sisters offered themselves equally to be part of this amalgamation. One of them had been within the walls of Bergerac Carmel for more than 62 years. Today Athens Carmel is a community of 13 nuns from many different places.

One admires equally the faith and generosity of the community in welcoming unknown sisters who are given full community rights. Missionary amalgamations of this kind should be promoted or encouraged in the Order. A primary concern is the care of the sick sisters in which everyone is involved. The liturgy, in the Latin rite, is celebrated in Greek and in French.

At the entrance to the external garden we are greeted by a statue of St. Therese. The Christians who come to the chapel or to see the sisters first recollect themselves before her statue. It is a sign of the wide popularity of our Carmelite saint, including in the Orthodox world, which speaks of miracles by her intercession, as well as apparitions. More than once some Orthodox Christian has stopped our sisters on one of their appearances outside, "You dress the same as Saint Therese..."

The Carmel in Athens was founded with a missionary vision in an environment that has a minority of Catholics and a majority of Orthodox. Vocations are scarce due to this phenomenon. However, the Order has always valued this missionary presence. We admire the perseverance and clarity of the 'pusillus grex' vocation, in a land that is Orthodox and apathetic. However, as the Absolute, God is above all apathy, and supports anyone who surrenders their life to love and serve Him. The small Catholic community appreciates the Carmelite sisters, participates gladly in their feasts, enjoying the welcome of the sisters. In one of the last earthquakes the fine guesthouse suffered some damage.

At the suppression of Istanbul-Kadikoy carmel (1977) the sisters withdrew to Iraklion and brought with them their archives. For this reason our sisters now possess some letters and exhortations from the pastoral visits of the apostolic delegate, Mgr. Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, today Blessed John XXIII. He was a great friend who always favoured his attentions on 'his' carmel in the land of Turkey.

I celebrated the solemnity of our Lady of Mt. Carmel, assisting the archbishop of Athens, Mgr. Nikolaos Foscolos. He dedicated the whole day to the sisters, he listened to each one and spoke with the community. I had the opportunity to speak with him at length. He taught me about the life of the [roman catholic] church in Greece and, in particularly, in Athens:

- five catholic dioceses in the country
- the pastoral visit of John Paul II was a great blessing
- the national orthodox church is intransigent and rigid
- there is discrimination against catholics
- there are 50,000 greek catholics, including roman catholic and byzantines [or greek catholics] among 11 million inhabitants.
- there are 45,000 filipino migrant workers
- there are 40,000 polish migrant workers
- there are 4,000 iraqi emigrants
- no one knows just how many migrants there are from Albania
- the pastoral care for so many emigrants is a challenge.
- and we spoke on so many other matters...

I would like to sum up my memories, the fruit of my contacts and my thoughts in these days at the service of our carmel in Athens. And I would like to conclude with a thought that is both heartfelt and full of admiration by making the following statement; it is right that the Order makes us aware of the need to help the four carmels in the Holy Land but in the same optic the Order should also think about how it can assist this carmelite presence on the hill of Athens-Iraklion.