

From the

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Journey to Christianity's ROOTS: 'Being there makes you realize that the Bible is history'

Last May, Charles Nienkirchen of Calgary's Nazarene University College led 20 Canadians into the crypt of a church in Salamis, Cyprus, to see the tomb of the Apostle Barnabas.

His students, touring with the Christian Odyssey 2003, were boggled.

The bones of Barnabas, travelling companion of the Apostle Paul, were first identified in the Salamis church in the fifth century. Barnabas was known to have been a native Cypriot and an unbroken tradition tells of his evangelization of and eventual martyrdom in Cyprus.



The Monastery of St. Barnabas

The claim of the tomb was deemed sufficient to grant the Church of Cyprus its independence from the patriarch of Antioch in the 400s, on the grounds Cyprus was then recognized as one of the original apostolic churches. A historical certainty? No, but certainly a possibility.

Nienkirchen's students were just as boggled by their visit to the Church of St. Lazarus in the Cypriot city of Larnaca. There, they saw another tomb, this one bearing the inscription, "Tetraimeros (Fourth Day), Friend of Jesus Christ."

Lazarus was the friend of Jesus of Nazareth, reported in the Christian Scriptures (John 11) as having been raised from his grave four days after his death. Because of the popular sensation this caused, the Pharisees sought to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus (John 12:10).

An ancient tradition holds that shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, Lazarus was seized, pushed out into the Mediterranean in a little boat and, against all odds, floated to Cyprus. There, some years later, he met Paul, Mark and Barnabas, who consecrated him the bishop of Larnaca, where he served for over 30 years. Hence the tomb inscription. A certainty? No, but as probable as any ancient landmark.

Regardless of the real provenance of either tomb, it is clear this is the Cyprus first evangelized by Paul and Barnabas, then revisited by Barnabas and John Mark (Acts 13-15). Seeing, touching, hearing and smelling the land walked by the first apostles has a profound effect on Nienkirchen's historically illiterate Canadian students.

"I learned so much about the roots of Christian history," said Leif Baradoy, 22, one of the 20 pilgrims on the Christian Odyssey 2003.

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"To actually go to the roots, to walk where the church was founded, makes the Bible come alive. Whatever you make of Christian theology, being there makes you realize that the Bible is history."

Nienkirchen has led these tours often enough that he now recognizes the stages his students, from teens to seniors, go through.

"First, there's culture shock. Nothing they know fits what they see all around them. Do bones have a story? What is the value of tradition?" the goateed professor said with a chuckle.



At the Tomb of St. Barnabas

"Then they begin to realize that the way they see the world" -- practical and progressive -- "isn't really the way the world is at all.

"Then they begin to reorient themselves. They start to look backward. Not immediately. It takes a while for the light to go on."

So what do they see when the light goes on?

Nienkirchen's face relaxes as he reaches back to his own past. In 1999, he took a sabbatical year at Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Israel, on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. There, the rector told him: "In the Middle East, the centuries don't follow one another; they coexist."

Nienkirchen leans forward: "These journeys are all about leading western Christians into the co-existence of the centuries."

The "journeys" Nienkirchen is speaking about are his Down Ancient Paths educational travel study tours (www.downancientpaths.com).

With a Ph.D in history from Waterloo University, he has taught Christian history and spirituality at Waterloo, Canadian Bible College / Canadian Theological Seminary, Rocky Mountain College and now Nazarene. Wherever he's taught, Nienkirchen has organized tours for students to the lands walked by the apostles:

- The Cross, the Cave and the Crown in 1995 to Turkey;
- In Search of Christian Roots in 1997 to Israel and Egypt;
- In Search of Atlantis, Turkey and the Aegean, in 1998;
- Christian Odyssey 2001 to Turkey and Greece;
- Classical and Christian Antiquity to Egypt in 2002; and
- Christian Odyssey 2003 to Cyprus, Turkey and Greece.

He is planning trips to Egypt in February -- Desert Solitudes, studying the third-century origins of monasticism. To Ethiopia, Jordan, Syria and Armenia in 2005 -- Following the Star to the Christian East. And to India in 2007 -- An Interfaith Journey to Christian India.

Shane Riczu, 22, of Calgary went to Egypt with Nienkirchen in 2002 to visit a quartet of Coptic monasteries on the Red Sea and the Wadi Natrum west of the Nile. They reached for the origins of Christian monasticism and eastern Christian spirituality in the third century.

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Journey, continued . . . ➡

"Some of these monasteries go back 1,600 years, older than any country. What amazed me was the continuity of the eastern tradition, the Coptic tradition, quite beyond anything . . .," the evangelical Riczu said, then halted. "I try to image what it's like to have a history that extends beyond your grandfather or maybe your great-grandfather. But these guys have spiritual great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfathers -- and older."

When he returned to Canada, Riczu was struck by the contrast between the artificiality of modern Canadian life -- "mechanical, over-organized, bustling all the time" -- and the "very organic, very rooted" life of the monks, their days spent in a calm and natural pattern of prayer and work. "But I think I connected most with their quest. Their desire is very similar to mine," Riczu said.

There's a unspoken connection between Nienkirchen's concern for the sense of history -- "the coexistence of the centuries" -- and his fascination with Eastern Christian spirituality.

The luminescent icons of the Eastern churches are not meant to be "representations" of the Saviour and saints. Rather, they are seen as thinnings of the veil between this world and not some "next" world, but rather the eternity that already exists beyond merely human sight and experience of the passage of time.

Just as icons are seen as portals into the already fulfilled reality of heaven, so is the life of the monk meant to replicate here, as much as possible, the life of glory and worship of the heavenly host. The monks feel an immediate link to their spiritual grandfathers of 500 or 1,000 years ago, because they see that as just a tiny segment of the divine "now" of an eternity beyond history.

"The theme of Eastern Christian spirituality is the transfiguration of reality, the journey to theosis, the direct contemplation of the divine light," said Nienkirchen, married and the father of three nearly grown children.

"The figures in the icons have large heads, large eyes and small mouths, because they're filled with glory. They're seeing all and taken beyond the realm of words -- they're pointing to the ultimate destiny of humanity."

Nienkirchen sees no conflict between Eastern Orthodox spirituality and his own Methodism. At Oxford, John Wesley studied the Greek fathers like Gregory of Nyssa, and saw himself as bringing Protestantism back to the emphasis on sanctification of life in this world, that has remained constant in the Christian east.



The Cave of the Apocalypse

Later in the Odyssey, during their visit to Patmos, the Canadians visited the Cave of the Apocalypse, where St. John the Divine received the revelation that became the last book of the New Testament. Also on Patmos, they spent over an hour in what Nienkirchen calls "spiritual conversation" with Abbot Antipas of the Monastery of St. John the Theologian.

When, as he always does, Nienkirchen asked what is necessary for the spiritual life, the abbot replied, first, studying the ancient fathers of the church, and second, humility. The abbot suggested that the perspective of the western world is limited by its narrow commitment to the scientific method and overly rationalistic view of life. The West is not rooted in humility, the abbot said, but rather in the quest for the mastery of life.

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Journey, continued . . . ➡

The Christian Odyssey 2003, running from April 28 to May 24, began in Cyprus (Larnaca, Paphos and ancient Agia Napa), then flew to Istanbul and Antioch, where Paul founded the first Christian community of Gentiles, and then on to what was once the Roman province of Cappadocia.

There, they took a ferry to Patmos, the island where John had the mystic experience of heaven related in the Book of Revelation. Then they toured the sites of the "seven churches" of which John speaks in that book: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Then Alexandria Troas, which Paul twice visited, then ancient Troy, Istanbul, Athens and Corinth, where Paul also preached.

The tour's introduction to Christian spirituality came very early, at Machairas Monastery in the Troodos Mountains of Cyprus. There, they met and spoke for almost two hours with Abbot Athanasius, now made famous as Fr. Maximos by author Kyriacos C. Markides in his 2001 book, *The Mountain of Silence*. "He certainly challenged my stereotype of monks, but in a very positive way," said Baradoy, who was raised in the Alliance church.

"I'd already read *The Mountain of Silence*, so I was expecting somebody very spiritual, very reverent. But what surprised me was his extreme joy. He was full of life. Extremely interested in us, genuinely interested in us. He had a godly presence, but it wasn't overwhelming. It was a pleasure just to be in his presence."

Baradoy said what impressed him most about the monks he met was their "deep appreciation of the power of prayer." Contrary to his expectation, they were not rejecting the world, but rather understood themselves to be serving it in lives centred on worship. They are very much involved in the local communities as negotiators, exemplars of faith, and spiritual directors to ordinary folk. But above all, they are constant intercessors for their communities in their organized hourly prayer.



The Monastery of Machairas

"I may seem a little less Protestant now, but I think many Protestants don't understand the value of monasteries and monastics," Baradoy said. "Protestants say they believe in the power of prayer, but the monks practise it. They live the idea of the church as a community of prayer, a reverence for the church itself."

Baradoy said that if western Christians could learn more of the "history, reverence and mystery of the church," they'd be "better equipped to speak to the issues of today" and develop a tradition of disciplined mysticism that could "compete with the New Age."

Cyprus is an island so beautiful the ancient Greeks thought it the birthplace of Aphrodite, goddess of love. But it has been torn by ethnic violence, especially since 1974, when Muslim Turkey invaded the northern third of the island and expelled the majority Orthodox Greeks to the poorer southern two-thirds. In Cyprus, the Christian Odyssey students encountered the presence of history and its intractability in another way.

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Journey, continued . . . ➔

The tour met up with Nienkirchen's Cypriot friend, Greek Orthodox priest Fr. Panayiotis Papageorgiou, who now pastors an Orthodox church in Florida. Papageorgiou has visited Calgary's Nazarene University College to give inter-session courses on eastern Christian spirituality, and now he flew to Cyprus for his holiday, spending the first five days of it with the Canadian tour.

Just ten days before the Calgary tour arrived, the Turkish Republic of Cyprus opened up the famous "green line" between itself and Greek Cyprus, allowing the displaced Greeks to visit -- for the first time in 30 years -- their ancestral farms and villages in the north.

The Canadians were accompanied by Papageorgiou across the green line to witness his return to his long-abandoned birthplace, the village of Marathonou an hour east of Nicosia. There, the priest found his ancestral home destroyed, his father's olive grove cleared as a hay field by its new Turkish owner, the village church abandoned, and the graveyard desecrated -- tombstones and monuments jumbled and shattered.

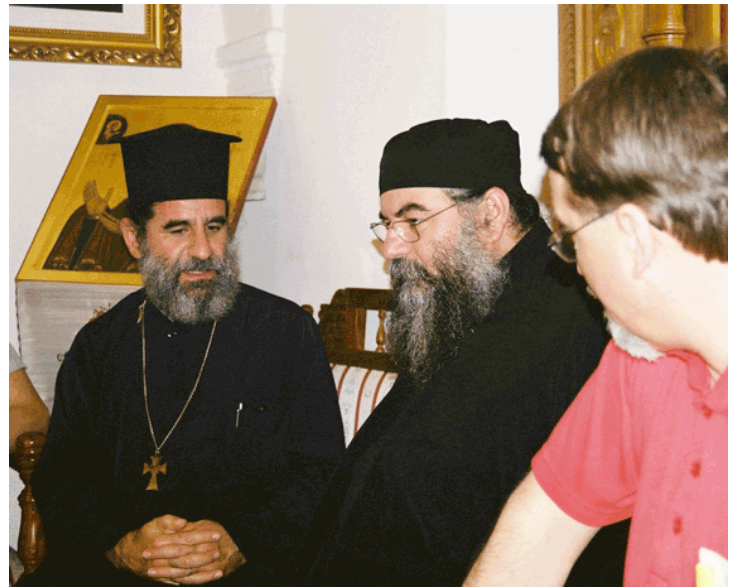
Against all odds, Papageorgiou found in the wrecked cemetery the small tomb of his grandfather, who himself had been an Orthodox priest at the turn of the last century. And there the grandson performed the Orthodox liturgy for the dead.

Papageorgiou had a gentle conversation with the son of the Turk who had taken over his family's ancient land. And the Orthodox priest conversed continually with the Muslim tour bus driver, Ozzie of Ozzie Trustful Travel, who drove them around Cyprus's north. And he spoke continually with the Muslims whom the tour met in the once-active Christian churches, like the 12th century Crusader church in Famagusta, now converted into a mosque.

"The dialogue never stopped, it never stopped," said Nienkirchen. "And that's what we need. I'm telling my gifted students to learn Arabic. What we need is a generation of Christians who can move into the Islamic world without flinching."



At the Tomb of St. Lazarus
the history of his island, of the church and eternity.



With Bishop Athanasios at Machairas

Later that same day, Papageorgiou accompanied the Calgary Christians first to the tomb of the apostle Barnabas in Salamis, and then the tomb of Lazarus in the crypt of the church in Larnaca. There, sitting beside the tomb of the Friend of Jesus Christ, the Orthodox priest related to the Canadians how, as a young boy, he had been deaf in his left ear, and his mother took him to the nearby shrine and tomb of St. Spyridon to pray for his healing. He was healed, and the first thing he heard was the "singing of angelic voices."

Thus was his personal history intertwined with