

Trip to Jerusalem Brings Christianity Alive For Armenian Youth

By Lisa M. Natcharian

CAMBRIDGE- Reading about Jesus and his times in the Bible is an essential component of any Christian education, but for 60 Armenian young people, aged 13 to 28, Christian history came alive last month during an evocative trip to Jerusalem with the Diocesan Department of Youth Ministry.

For ten days in August, these school-aged youth and young professionals were privileged to not simply visit significant Christian sites, but to experience their Christian heritage by holding Bible studies and symbolic services in the very places Jesus lived. From a Divine Liturgy at 4:00 am in the Tomb of Christ, to a renewal of faith service at the Jordan River, to personal audiences with the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and even fellowship evenings with local Armenians, the group created memories that will continue to touch their lives for years to come.

UNPRECEDENTED ACCESS

The DYM group was granted unprecedented access to many holy sites under Armenian auspices thanks to the generosity of His Beatitude Patriarch Torkom Manoogian. Formerly the Primate of the Eastern Diocese, the Patriarch knew personally many of the trip's participants, and went out of his way to make each one feel at home.

One example is the aforementioned nighttime Divine Liturgy in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Armenian priests and seminarians perform this service every night to help maintain their claim to the tomb, but usually in a locked area without a congregation. In contrast, the youth group was invited into the holy sanctuary, and allowed to spend time meditating at the various Holy sites, the crucifixion site, and the stone of unction, the Passion area and others. Trip leaders Father Vasken

Kouzouian and Father Mardiros Chevian were each invited to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, and the entire group was given Holy Communion right in the tomb. In a location that during the daytime is crowded with jostling tourists, these young people were able to stand alone in the quiet hours of the morning and think carefully about Christ's last days.

"It was a phenomenal experience," says Father Vasken. "The group could really feel the presence of Jesus," adds Yn. Arpi Kouzouian.

TOUCHING SERVICES

It was the addition of moving religious services at each holy location that elevated the trip from a touristic jaunt to a Christian pilgrimage. At the Jordan River, the younger group participated in a Renewal of Faith service, where Fr. Vasken blessed river water and poured a few drops over each person's head. Then all were able to take some blessed water home with them. At the Sea of Galilee, the group rented a boat, traveled to the middle of the sea, then stopped to read the Bible passages about Christ calming the storm and walking on water, and performed a special service there. At the tomb of Mary, the group sang a special hymn honoring the mother of God, and then participated in a requiem service for mothers.

In the St. James Cathedral, one 16-year-old participant was baptized, with many a dry eye in the room, as the group watched the symbolic birth of a Christian among thousand-year-old relics. The young girl was also able to receive her first communion in the tomb of Christ. At the Greek Orthodox Wedding Church in Cana, where Jesus performed his first miracle turning water into wine at a wedding, Father Vasken and Yn. Arpi Kouzouian renewed their marriage vows in front of pilgrimage participants. And, in the city of Bethlehem, the group performed a Divine Liturgy and climbed to the roof of the Church of the Nativity, where they could see the Shepherd's Fields and the Bell Tower, and Armenian Dome where the whole world watches a bell rung at Christmastime.

With Bibles in hand, the group read the appropriate passages about Christ healing the crippled man at the Pool of Bethesda, Christ healing the blind man at the Pool of Siloam, and Christ's trials at the prison where he was kept before his crucifixion.

Two special requiem services were also held. One, in honor of Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan, a founder of the ACYOA, was held at his gravesite. This site, in need of some care inspired many of participants to suggest a return trip to put the site to rights.

The second special requiem service was held in St. James Cathedral for Very Rev. Fr. Haigazoum Melconian, who died in May of this year. Fr. Haigazoum had planned to attend this trip to Jerusalem as a leader. Several of his nieces and nephews, as well as his former youth from Cheltenham and Bayside parishes were present for the service.

EYE-OPENING VISITS

To help the participants further understand the land where Jesus lived, the group also traveled to several famous historic sites. These

privileged young people were able to reach out and touch the famed Western Wall (also known as the Wailing Wall), which is the last standing remnant of the main temple of Jerusalem, where Jesus taught at age 12, and later overturned the money-changers tables. The group also viewed the original Dead Sea Scrolls, and the caves where they were discovered. These fragments of the oldest known Hebrew Old Testament are estimated to be 2,300 years old. Housed in the Shrine of the Books, the Scrolls contain only minor differences when compared to our current-day Bibles.

The group also visited the Jewish and Moslem quarters of Jerusalem, along with several mosques and synagogues. And, the company traveled to Masada, the Castle of Herod, symbol of Israeli nationalism and site of the 3-year battle of the Hebrews against the Romans. The group was even able to view a recently excavated boat dating from the time of Christ.

HEART-WARMING FELLOWSHIP

Far from being a trip where participants simply tried to visit as many significant sites as possible, this pilgrimage had more intimated goals. The objective for the younger group (ages 13 to 18) was to help them not only to visualize these holy sites, but also to build pride in the considerable Armenian care taking role there. For the older group (ages 19-27), the trip was meant to help them analyze and internalize Jesus' leadership style.

In addition, the Patriarch also initiated numerous opportunities for fellowship and interactions with local seminarians, citizens, and even himself. His Beatitude personally taught the group a special hymn, "Vork Zartaretzin," an unusual honor for the participants. Evening entertainment includes music by local Armenian bands and dancing with almost 100 local citizens, and the Patriarch even organized a basketball game between the youth group and the seminarians. His Beatitude tossed up the first ball himself!

STRENGTHENED CHRISTIAN TIES

"We are must express our deep appreciation to the Patriarch," says Father Vasken Kouzouian. "He made everything possible."

"This trip really made the group faith come alive," adds Yn. Arpi. "The group loved feeling comfortable in the Armenian quarter, and took great pride in the scope of the Armenian presence in Jerusalem. The Dept. of Youth Ministry hopes to make this trip an annual one."

Many of the participants kept journals of their experiences, and while the full impact of the trip may take some time to sink in, reminders will certainly appear all throughout the group's lives.

The final words of the Patriarch will remain with the group forever. "You may not realize it, but you have given as much to us as you have received."