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An experience beyond words can comprehend.

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A Glimpse at My Journey to the Land Chosen by God

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I have always seen myself in the shoes of St. Thomas when it related to my faith. Perhaps this is so because I was born where St. Thomas is said to have preached and lived among the people to bring Christianity to them - the land of India.

India has a variety of religious traditions and has given birth to many of the popular religions of the world. I have always respected the writings of other religions and thus I wanted to know what made the Christian Scriptures different from the others. My pilgrimage to the Holy Land gave me the answer. What I discovered is that though all the various scriptures offer guidelines to be and do good, only the Christian Scriptures contained prophecies spoken in the Old Testament that were fulfilled in the New Testament through the birth, life and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Visiting the Holy Land was a blessing and a call for me; a dream come true. At the age of 7, when I first began to serve in my parish clothed as an altar server, I became conscious of three desires. First, to become a priest to serve the people with honor and integrity. Secondly, to someday visit the Land that God had chosen, the Holy Land where Jesus had walked as a human being so many years ago. And thirdly, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, as a martyr. My first wish for priesthood became a reality in 2002; the second in 2012. I am awaiting the third.

My companions for the pilgrimage to the Holy Land were a group of Christians representing different rites. I was filled with emotion as I eagerly looked forward to the day I would place my feet, breathe the air and see the places where my God physically planted Himself in our universe. My imagination and joy were fulfilled when we reached God's Chosen Land. Even though the landscape had probably changed over time due to natural disasters, invasions, civil destruction and modernization, we could still experience within us, the rich history of God's work and presence in his Holy Land.

We began our pilgrimage in and through the country of Jordan, since much of the Old Testament history takes place in that area. On that first day, we travelled to Mount Nebo and stood with Moses as he viewed a Promised Land that he was forbidden to enter even though he had led the Israelites out of Egypt to this place. There on Mount Nebo, we visited the Christian memorial to the burial place of Moses.

As I looked out from the top of the mountain, all I could see was a land of valleys and hills with little greenery. I wondered what Moses must have thought as he looked across the same expanse so many millennia ago. His vision must have been different from ours so I prayed there on the mountain that God would grant me the grace of understanding to see beyond my own human vision.

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We left the mountain and continued by bus across Jordan and soon reached Israel. Our first stop was the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. It was fitting that our group immersed ourselves in the waters of the Jordan, renewing our baptismal vows... perhaps as earlier pilgrims had done in the past.

In this spot, I found myself experiencing many mixed feelings. One becomes very aware of the political situation in the Holy Land and the possibility of terrorism and how a pilgrim like myself could be affected, especially during the Christmas season. A sense of danger was not far from my mind and I wondered if I was destined to die there. Even though I was ready to give my life for Christ, I was still filled with a sense of foreboding about the future. A thought prevailed my mind, as though something were saying, "Your time starts now! Good luck!"

These mixed feelings remained with me until we reached the Sea of Galilee. As I stood there watching the fishermen catching their fish, I almost expected to hear Jesus calling out to me to "Come, follow Me." Instead, I heard a call from a fellow priest inviting me to come and eat "Peter's fish" as these were commonly referred to. I was reminded that Peter had been a fisherman too and had spent many hours on the lake in his boat catching fish just as the fishermen were doing today.

We spent the day around this lake which is surrounded by nearby hills. That evening, we went on a boat cruise. The night sky was very clear and the sea was calm. I watched how the Moon cast its silvery light over the waves. It was beautiful. I meditated on how Jesus walked over these waters and had invited Peter to do so as well. By stepping out of his boat, Peter, an ordinary fisherman, became a role model of faith. In those few moments before he realized what he was doing and began to doubt, the same waters he fished every day had been under his obedience.

After the cruise, we returned to the inn where we spent the night. The next morning, we visited the house in Nazareth where tradition holds that Mary grew up. The Church of the Annunciation was constructed over the site of this house. I spent time in prayer there, contemplating how the history of the world changed with Mary's "Yes." Our guide then brought us to the location of the former well where Mary must have drawn water; an ordinary young girl who was now ordinary no longer.

From Nazareth, we travelled to Cana, where Jesus performed his first miracle at someone's happy wedding reception. "Do as he tells you," Mary had instructed the servants...

Our next stop was Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, which has been considered the hometown of Jesus. Here he often preached in the synagogue and performed some of the miracles of his public ministry. It is believed that Capernaum was also the home of Peter and several of the other apostles. The town has become more of a museum than a place for people to live. Because of this, I pondered the prophecy of Jesus who cursed Capernaum because its people would not accept his teachings.

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This day we also travelled to the place where Jesus delivered his "Sermon on the Mount" as described in the Gospel of Matthew. I was reminded that this sermon included some of the most important and beautiful teachings of Jesus, the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer among them. Jesus preached to a huge multitude of people who had come to hear him. They came from Jerusalem, Galilee, the Decapolis, even from the lands across the Jordan.

Later, not far away, we were shown the place where Jesus had first appeared to his apostles after the Resurrection. West of the Sea of Galilee, we find Mt. Tabor, considered the place of the Transfiguration, another site we visited during our pilgrimage.

The next day was Christmas Eve and we arrived in Bethlehem, which is now under the Palestinian control. To be able to celebrate Christmas in the town where Jesus was born, was a great blessing for me. I saw the joy among the people in the marketplace and I couldn't help but think of the joy Jesus brings every time someone remembers Him. For the rest of us, after our deaths we may be remembered for a few years and perhaps even in books, but Jesus is forever remembered not only in books, but in the hearts and minds of the people who believe in Him.

One of the most wonderful experiences of my life was to concelebrate an interdenominational Midnight Mass in an Orthodox Chapel along with other fellow priests and bishops in our group. I could give thanks for my entire priesthood because of that united way of worship. No one claimed supremacy over others; each of us shared our parts of the English version of their Lectionary.

Though outside the chapel, the scene was very commercial, the pilgrims were still able to maintain an atmosphere of fervor and prayer as they recalled this meaningful event in the history of mankind in the town it occurred.

The Church of the Nativity has traditionally been considered built over the cave where Jesus was born. It is administered by three rites: Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic. I found the pious devotion of the pilgrims in the Church of the Nativity to be remarkable. However, at the same time, I discovered that there is dissension among the three rites using the Church. This dissension creates the impression that there is a great need of healing among our fellow Christians. In the main church, I clearly saw the selfish way the monks from each of these rites tried to outdo the others.

I did not want to keep such negative thoughts in my mind and heart so I returned to a place in silence and remembered the thought I had at the Jordan River, "Your time starts now!" In that Church that day, I offered a prayer that whatever this "time" meant, that it should be fulfilled.

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On the morning of Christmas Day, we arrived in Jerusalem and began walking the Stations of the Cross. My tears flowed as I thought about the last footsteps of Jesus. He had walked many miles during His ministry, calling people to be happy and peaceful. In return, He received just the opposite.

As I walked along I noted a difference between the pilgrims and the local people. The eyes of the pilgrims were filled with tears as they remembered what Jesus endured along the way to Golgotha... In contrast, the locals walked along as though nothing had ever taken place in their city.

The distance between the praetorium where Jesus was condemned and Golgotha, the Place of the Skull is not far, but the burden of grief that one feels as one walks in His footsteps is difficult to bear. Who cannot weep when one remembers that Jesus was already so weakened by the loss of blood from the scourging, that He falls three times along the way. What sorrow and helplessness pierces His mother's heart as she sees her beloved Son scarcely able to walk.

How grateful we feel when we recall that Simon of Cyrene helped Him carry the cross and Veronica uses her veil to wipe the precious blood from His face. Despite His weakened condition, Jesus still thinks of others as He tries to console the women of Jerusalem. As we reach Golgotha, the horror of His crucifixion drains our own emotions as we see Jesus unceremoniously stripped of his clothes and thrown down on the cross. The soldiers stretch out his arms and anchor his feet. We can hear the hammers ring as the nails are pounded into his wrists and feet. Finally, we hear His last words as He commends Himself into His Father's hands.

Finally, when I arrived at the sepulcher where the crucified Jesus was placed after His death, I found peace. The empty tomb... the only one like it in the whole world! This was the only place during my entire pilgrimage that I did not want to leave. I could have stayed there forever! My thoughts have dimmed about the other places we visited, but not the tomb. I often think about my experience at the tomb and wish I could recover the sense of peace I found there.

On the way back, we were shown the upper room - the site of the Last Supper. There I thanked God for the gift of the institution of the Eucharist and the priesthood. From there we visited the tomb of David on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, and later, to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed with His apostles before His arrest. We also visited the tomb of Mary, known as the Church of the Assumption, a church cut into the rock with the traditional site of Mary's tomb below it.

Other places we visited on our pilgrimage included the "Wailing Wall", a holy place of Judaism where we saw the touching faith of the Jewish travellers and the local people as well, who place paper prayer requests into the slits of this ancient wall. The Wailing Wall is traditionally believed to be the remains of the Western Wall of the Second Temple that was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. We later went on to Jericho, one of the world's oldest cities and to the port of Jaffa where Peter ministered and performed several miracles.

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One of the several Old Testament sites we visited was the place where Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt when she turned back to see the destruction of Sodom. Here one finds a rock salt formation on Mount Sodom that is called the "Lot's Wife" pillar. Our pilgrimage also included visits to Mount Tabor, as well as the Qumran community, the settlement near the place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

Toward the end of our journey, we crossed into Egypt and had lunch at the Taba Resort, along the Red Sea's Gulf of Aqaba. We learned why the sea appeared red. The mountains in the area have a reddish hue and thus reflect that color in the water. This area is also one of the best places in the world to view colorful coral beds. Some of these also give a reddish hue to the water along with bacteria in bloom at certain times of the year.

After lunch, our destination became St. Catherine's Monastery to see the burning bush of Moses. It was a long drive to reach the Mount Sinai area where the monastery is located. It is a very touching place because it appears to be only the faith of the monks that keeps the burning bush alive. We were told that the bush cannot be grown anywhere else and that it would die if the monks left the monastery. We also learned that many people have tried to take cuttings from the bush to plant elsewhere but have not succeeded. I kept thinking about those monks and their deep faith; and how faith can work wonders to keep alive a bush with no roots. Within the monastery grounds is the well where Moses met his future spouse. Also in the area is Aaron's burial place and a rock formation shaped like the golden calf.

This whole area is very inhospitable with poor roads and mountainous terrain and is very very dangerous as well. I couldn't help but think of Joseph's will power and boldness to bring a young woman and a little child into that desert and over the mountains to escape from Herod's wrath. Even today, travelling is difficult. There is much road construction and impassable places still; so this time we continued our journey by plane to Cairo.

The next day we arrived at Giza, on the outskirts of Cairo where we toured the ancient pyramids, the burial places of the pharaohs and also the famous Egyptian Museum. Our final stop was to visit the birthplace of Moses, being mindful that centuries later, Jesus and His parents had lived for a time in the same area.

I learned some important things from my pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It is good to walk in the shoes of St. Thomas. Doubting paves the way to a zeal and desire to confirm what is true. I discovered that our faith is true and has its sources and foundation in the Holy Land. I also came to the realization that every Christian is blessed with gifts beyond their comprehension. I wanted to see with my own eyes where the history of salvation had begun. I found that despite the turmoil we hear about every day from that part of the world, salvation history is still available for us to discover.

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