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The FutureChurch pilgrims hike uphill amid ubiquitous mustard plants at Corinth. (Sr. Charlotte Berres)



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On March 5, an international group of 29 pilgrims gathered in Thessaloniki, Greece, to embark on FutureChurch's third pilgrimage in that ancient country: "Following in the Footsteps of our Foremothers in Faith."

I was blessed to be the educational guide as we explored and prayed at ancient archaeological sites where first-century women founded or led house churches; financially supported early Christian evangelists such as Paul, Silas and Timothy; welcomed the Gospel preached at their local synagogues; and/or carried good news to their neighbors and distant cities such as Rome and Ephesus.

I loved helping people discover that far from being anti-woman, Paul worked side by side with them in preaching the world-restoring Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

With her extensive knowledge of ancient Greek history, Greek culture and Byzantine history, local tour leader, Aliki Pelteki, was an invaluable, unfailingly patient resource, especially as each day passed with more disturbing news from officials in the U.S. and in Greece.



It seems like we used gallons of hand sanitizer to ward off coronavirus. (Julie Magri)

As of late February, only four confirmed cases of coronavirus had landed on Greek shores and all were linked to travel to Italy. Insofar as Greek officials had established aggressive containment measures, FutureChurch co-directors Russ Petrus and Deborah Rose-Milavec elected to proceed with the tour, simultaneously sharing all information with registrants.

Their overarching passion to discover the "mothers of the church" undoubtedly fueled our pilgrims' determination to persevere despite the risks involved. As

providence would have it, Julie Magri, a family practice doctor from Massachusetts who had worked with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was also part of our group. She helped us stay calm as we assiduously scrubbed our hands and bumped elbows.

But mostly we forgot about the coronavirus.

Chauffeured by our skilled (and kind) bus driver, Stefanos, we journeyed from Thessaloniki through the length of Greece from Philippi (Kavala) in the north to Corinth and Athens in the south. Everywhere our focus was on the women who were so influential in beginning and building up early communities of Christ believers. At each site we prayed and remembered our foremothers and tried to envision what it would have been like to be Christian in the first century.

At Philippi, we honored Lydia, the wealthy purple dye merchant from Thyratira in Asia Minor (Turkey), who founded the first house church in that city and probably led the group of female seekers — possibly former Artemis worshippers — who gathered by the river and listened to Paul (Acts 16:13-15).

We also remembered Euodia and Syntyche, believed to be among the leaders at Philippi (the *episkopoi* and *diakonoi*) who Paul writes he seeks to reconcile. Using a specific Greek word connoting evangelization, Paul says they "struggled beside me in the work of the Gospel" (Philippians 4:2-3).

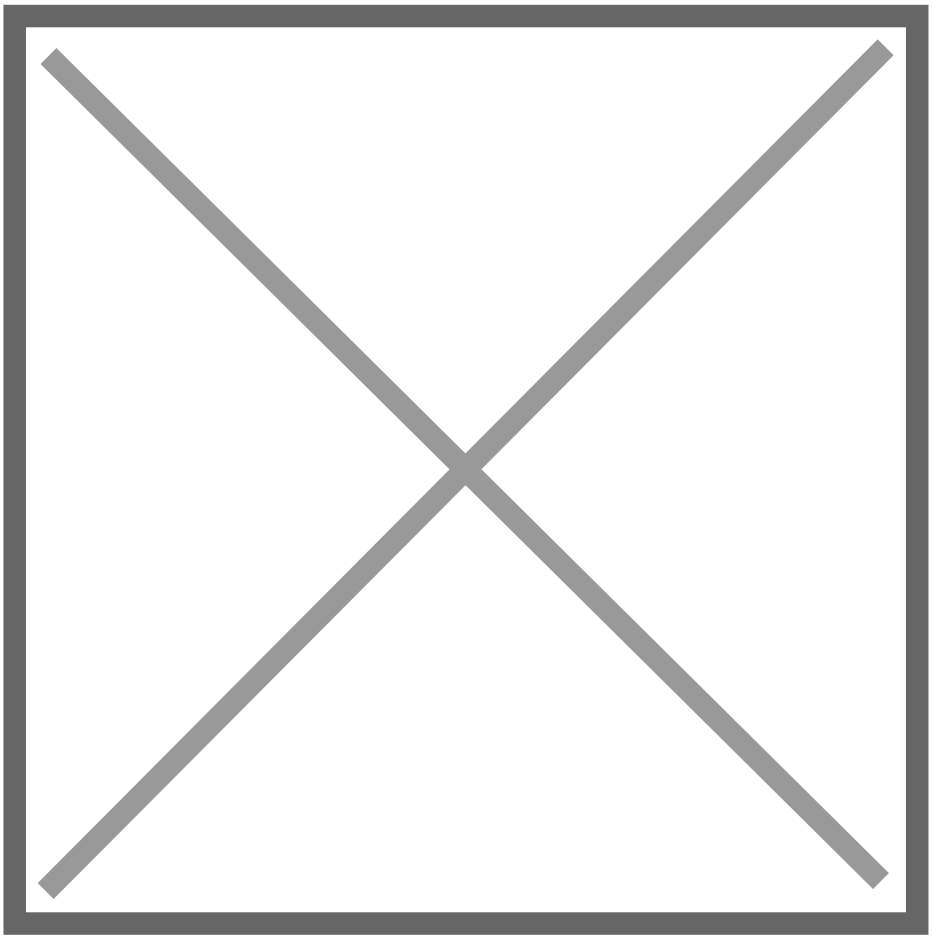
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Petrus, the pilgrimage spiritual director, coordinated special prayer services led by individual participants. We sang "Come to the Water" beside Philippi's sparkling waters where Lydia was probably baptized, and we prayed:

> Reconciling One, we honor the leadership of Euodia and Syntyche. While we do not know the source of their differences, we suspect both were passionate about serving the Church. Help our churches today engage courageously in honest dialogue and work toward just resolution of differences.

At Thessaloniki (Acts 17:4), Berea (Acts 17:12) and Athens, we remembered the many "leading women" who were so receptive to the Christian Gospel. Unfortunately, among these passages, only Damaris in Athens is named (Acts 17:32-34).

The rapid growth of early Christianity is due in no small measure to the ministry and patronage of such "leading women," including Phoebe, Prisca (Romans 16:1-5), and Lydia (Acts 16:11-15, 40), who welcomed early Christian missionaries, both male and female, into the complex social network of Greco-Roman households.



Site of excavated shops at Corinth are seen in the foreground. It is possible that Prisca and Aquila's tentmaking shop/house church was near here. (Lucy Rieger)

At Corinth, we remembered Prisca and Phoebe. Although Paul is often credited with founding the church at Corinth, Pauline scholar and Dominican Fr. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor* observes that the married missionary couple Prisca and Aquila had arrived some nine years before Paul did. This dynamic duo had been expelled from

Rome by Claudius around 41 A.D. and already had a prosperous tent-making trade — and probably an established house church — by the time Paul arrived in 50 A.D. (Acts 18:2-3,12).

With Aquila, Prisca co-founded house churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome. Their tent-making shop and house church was such an effective evangelizing center in Corinth that Paul soon sent them to Ephesus to begin evangelizing there. Here Prisca is shown instructing the famous disciple Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). In Romans 16:4, Paul tells us "all the churches of the Gentiles" give thanks for Prisca and Aquila's missionary work. With Paul, Prisca and Aquila could also be considered "apostles to the Gentiles."

We learn about Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 when Paul introduces her to the church of Rome as a *diakonos* and benefactor (*prostatis*) from the church at Cenchreae, a small port city near Corinth. The exact meaning of *diakonos* in the first century is unclear except that it does signify a leadership role.

In this instance, Phoebe is carrying Paul's letter to Rome and, as was the practice with early letters, she would have been the first to proclaim the letter to the Roman community. Unfortunately Phoebe's important ministry is inexplicably deleted in Catholic lectionary readings



There was a profusion of mustard plants blooming outside ancient Corinth. (Sr. Charlotte Berres)

When we arrived at Corinth, our pilgrim band was disappointed to discover that the archaeological site was closed because of the coronavirus. But because the ruins were mostly below ground level and clearly visible through a chainlink fence, our ever-resourceful Aliki was able to give us a fine overview of the ancient city, including the forum with its famous Bema where Paul was tried before the proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12-16).

As we prayed outside Corinth's city gates, acres upon acres of blooming mustard plants blessed our sun-drenched service honoring Phoebe the *diakonos:*

> Open our minds to see the women deacons in our history. … Open the hearts of church leaders to say "yes" to the women who reach out in love, ready to respond faithfully to God's call in their lives.

As I gazed at the sea of yellow blossoms, I reflected on Jesus's brilliant parable that the kin-dom of heaven is like a mustard seed. All three synoptic texts are a bit misleading implying that this smallest of seeds grows into a large shrub or tree. But in ancient times, the mustard plant was considered a weed — ubiquitous and once rooted, unstoppable — quickly taking over everything else in the field (Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19).



Enriching dinner conversations near Corinth bring joy to all — and the food was good, too! (Lucy Rieger)

The message? God's reign starts with something very tiny but quickly grows everywhere. You cannot stop the reign of God.

The mustard plants at Corinth brought us hope as well as beauty.

On the final evening, we shared the high points of our experience. Diane from Philadelphia said: "When I came, I just wanted to find out about women in the church, but when we were talking about all these women who were leading house churches and small groups, I realized 'Oh, I'm doing that and I can do more of that.' So, it really was revelatory."

Anastacia from South Africa found that "[The pilgrimage] takes me from one step to another step, understanding more about women. Understanding more about working together as women."

Interactions around the edges were a highpoint for Jane from Washington, D.C. She said: "The bus and meal conversations were so incredible. … Like, 'Oh, here's some delicious food!' … But the conversation was about the divine feminine." Jane also shared her dinner conversation about the coronavirus: "What's the theology of virus? We should not be dividing ourselves from one another. The coronavirus reminds us of our oneness and interconnectedness as a human family."

Amanda from Dublin arrived with the idea that the future church "is something that we're striving toward. … But what I found this week is that it's already happening. There are lots of amazing powerful women doing amazing things right now."

Our family practice doctor Julie had hesitated to sign up for the trip "because I thought it would just get me frustrated and angry about the role of women in today's church." Instead she found herself "really surprised that I'm leaving less angry. I think I'm feeling full of hope."

Sallie from Mahwah, New Jersey, voiced a commonality heartily affirmed by everyone — "I think one of the most dramatic things that has changed for me is that when we came, there was just a sea of people. And tonight, I feel like there's a real community here and it's amazing that it could happen so quickly."

As we prepared to offer farewell elbow bumps (in lieu of hugs), April from Mason, Ohio, shared her own home-going plan:

> It just was such a blessing to me when we were in that field of yellow flowers and the imagery of a mustard seed and that, you know, it is kind of like our faith. You cannot stop it. It's ubiquitous, which is God, which is love. And this is what we shared this trip. And I'm going to take that back with me and spread it. I like to say #alwayslivingyellow.



FutureChurch pilgrims "letting their light shine" on International Women's Day near hanging monasteries of Meteora (Russ Petrus)

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk, an NCR board member, served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. Her recent book, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, was awarded first place in the history category by the Catholic Press Association. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology. By March 15, all pilgrims from the FutureChurch trip had arrived home safe and entered a two-week self-quarantine.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go here to sign up.*

**This story has been updated to note that Fr. Jerome Murphy-O'Conner is a Dominican priest and a Pauline scholar.*