



A member of our group sits at the news desk

Tea at the *Camlica Tepesi* was followed by a visit to the *Samanyolu Television Station*, another endeavor of the Gulen movement (also talked about earlier in this series). It was here that some members of our group sat behind the news desk and took their turns at being international anchorpersons. Thankfully the cameras were not on. Our tour of STV ended with lunch and the opportunity to visit with management personnel of the station and discuss, in general, news and television programming in Turkey, with an emphasis on the differences between public and private broadcasting.

Our afternoon was spent visiting the Topkapi Palace located in the European sector of Istanbul. Construction on this complex, the first Ottoman Palace in the country, began in 1453. Today, like most buildings from this era, it is a museum. Up to this point I had already taken almost 700 pictures. I had previously disregarded some of the “no picture” notices at other places we had visited, but here the presence of the Turkish guards armed with machine guns and accompanied by German Shepherds were enough to persuade me to respect the signs and purchase tourist books which contained the pictures I wanted.

The palace showed all aspects of Ottoman life in Constantinople in the 15th century. But I found particular interest in those halls that housed artifacts of religious significance.

The first hall we entered (as we began our counterclockwise tour of the halls) contained relics of Mohammed, the founder of Islam. Among these are articles of clothing, two swords and other weapons belonging to Mohammed. Also in the hall is a footprint of the Islamic prophet, a case decorated in gold and precious stones which contain hair from his beard, another containing a tooth, another his seal, and yet another old keys which had come from the Kaaba. I felt a church-like atmosphere in this hall as an Imam chanted from the Koran (which is done twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, out of respect for Mohammed and his remains). While impressed with the fervor of the Muslims viewing these relics, I did find it a bit strange that a religion that forbids representations of people and living things in their houses of worship, show such respect for relics of their founder in a museum. I could not help but inwardly smile at the similarity of the relics in this room and relics in Catholic Churches and shrines.

As we continued through the various chambers of the Topkapi Palace I quickly discovered that Mohammed’s relics were not the only relics on display here.

The Topkapi Palace, also contains the remains and relics of individuals close to Christianity and Judaism. Several buildings away from where we had viewed Mohammed's relics, we found ourselves in a room containing precious jewelry of gold and rare stones. We had heard that somewhere in one of the chambers of this palace was the skull of John the Baptist. At last we were in the room that contained the remains of the cousin of Jesus but the slow-moving lines were testing our patience. At last we were standing in front of the glass case which contained not only the skull, but also the right arm and hand of John. Both relics were encased in gold that preserved and held together the brittle remains. Openings in the metal cases allowed us to view the bones. While there is some question as to exactly how these relics came into the possession of the palace, the relics themselves are believed to be authentic.



**Skull of John the Baptist
Bones of right hand of**



John the Baptist

Another room, the Privy Room, housed displays of swords of various religious leaders in the Islamic tradition, which include prophets and kings mentioned in the Old Testament. The oldest of these swords is said to have belonged to King David (2nd book of Samuel in the Old Testament). I did not recognize the names associated with the majority swords on display, as these were Islamic leaders with roots in the Ottoman Empire. But the sword of David is not the oldest relic in the Palace.

Another room, which was under renovation at the time of our visit, is said to house the staff of Moses, along with staffs of other prophets and holy men. While we were able to enter this room, we were told that the staffs were locked in a nearby area until the renovation was completed. It was at this point that I became skeptical that a piece of wood could have survived for over 3200 years without rotting and decaying. After returning from our trip I asked a local expert on wood and wooden antiques, and he told me that, under the right circumstances, wood could remain intact over this long a period of time. (Sunken Roman ships made of wood have been recently recovered from the

ocean floor and were in remarkably good condition.) Nevertheless, I still remain skeptical.

The final area of the palace that we visited, as daylight was fading and the museum was nearing closing time, was anything but religious. It was the Harem, a self-contained walled off section of the palace that was large enough to be a city in itself. It was here that a young heir to the Sultan throne was raised. The sexual implications of the history and function of this part of the palace were downplayed by our tour guide for this area. Most of our group from the States, Jewish and Christian, toured the Harem while our Muslim hosts from the states went to the Mosque to pray. I was struck by the irony of the situation.

After leaving Topkapi Palace we again boarded our bus (it seemed like we were spending more time on the bus than we were in our hotel rooms) and traveled to some hills on the outskirts of Istanbul that were the home of Fatih University. Here we met up with another group from the States and enjoyed a “university” meal and exchanged conversation with members of the faculty and administration.

Our final day...

Our final day in Istanbul was a bit less “action-packed” than the previous days of our trip, but it was busy nonetheless. After breakfast we headed for the *Grand Covered Bazaar* which is believed to be the largest shopping center in the world. Here we would have the morning to browse, shop and buy souvenirs from the nearly 4000 merchants in the complex. If we dared, we were free to wander off on our own, or we could stay with our group. I remained with the group for a couple of hours and then got brave enough to drift off. We had been asked to rejoin our group at noon at the main entrance where we had begun. In spite of the maze of shop-lined roads and walkways, finding my way back was easy. All I had to do was walk downhill – no matter where I was. As long as I continued walking downhill, I would eventually arrive at the entrance. After regrouping, we compared the contents of our bags, showing off purchases that spoke of our ability (or lack of it) to bargain with the locals. If this had been a contest of our abilities, I would probably have come in last.



In a country where more than 98% of the citizenship is Muslim, it was no surprise that a Mosque could be located almost anywhere. The area surrounding the *Grand Bazaar* was no exception. To the left of the main entrance was the *New Mosque*. Carved in stone at the gate in the outer wall of the mosque was the date it had been completed – 1663. “New” in a country whose culture dates back thousands of years, is a relative term.



The afternoon was spent, in part, on a “dinner” boat where we had lunch. Aboard the vessel was a crew of three, which included the waiter. On a vessel designed to hold and feed a hundred or so people, there was only our group of eleven. We literally had the boat all to ourselves. It was magnificent. After lunch we lounged on the upper deck. The sky was clear and the breeze comforting as we viewed the old walls of Constantinople,



ancient summer palaces from the Ottoman era and modern hotels and restaurants which lined both the European and Asian shores of the Bosphorus Straits. This two-hour cruise provided a relaxing and near perfect end to almost two weeks of cultural and religious exchange.

After the boat trip, we returned to our hotel to pack and prepare for our 5:30 AM departure for the airport the next morning. Many of us gathered in the lobby that evening to reminisce and recall the highlights of our experience.

Our return flight to San Antonio via Munich and Chicago was uneventful.

Some final thoughts ...

My intention in writing this series was to write primarily from a historical-religious perspective. There were many activities of our trip that did not fall into this category, and if I were to try and include all of them into these reflections, this series may never end. It is difficult to put into words the full impact, both cultural and religious, of these ten days. I mentioned at the beginning the two suspension bridges that link not only the continents of Europe and Asia, but the two halves of Istanbul as well. These two bridges stand as symbolic pillars, as beacons of sharing, which bridge the cultures of east and west.



As a result of my trip I have gained a better understanding of this country sometimes referred to as the cradle of Christianity. I have gained a greater appreciation of the culture of Turkey and its people who, though embracing a faith much different from my own, are probably among the most hospitable people on earth. Since sharing my travel experiences with others, many of whom were in Turkey when in the military, I have heard countless stories about the hospitality of the Turks.

Finally, I would like to thank Msgr. Mike for allowing me to put this series on the parish web site. And I would like to thank those of you who have taken the time to read it. My goal in writing this was to help demonstrate the fact that most Muslims are a peace-loving people and that Islam is a religion of peace, not violence. One would be unrealistic to deny that radical extremists have given Islam a back eye. But we should not judge the religion by these extremists any more than we would judge American Christianity by the past violence of the KKK, or Irish Catholicism by the actions of the of the IRA.

I would like to end with a quote from the document the *Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions*. (Second Vatican Council -- November 28, 1965)

The (Catholic) Church has a high regard for Muslims. They worship God who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, ... They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. ... they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his ... Mother they also honor, and even at times devotedly invoke. ...

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. This Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let (us) together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values...

AMEN!

Some additional pictures...



Head coverings are optional among Muslim women in Turkey



Walls of ancient Constantinople



Imam (in white) leads prayer



Our Group



Washing feet before entering mosque