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***Watching God Build His Church:
Our Family's Journey of Faith
... an Interview with Janet Ray***

INSIDE: Work Widows; Holy Sex; Holy Work and much more...

Watching God Build His Church: Our Family Journey of Faith

Interview with Janet Ray

by Heidi Hess Saxton



One hundred feet tall and five times as wide, the imposing stone ledge has a gaping hole that marks what was once a pre-eminent cultic center in the

Greco-Roman Empire. It venerated Pan, the “holy goat” and keeper of shepherds and sheep, as well as “Our Lord the Caesar,” for whom Caesarea Philippi was named. Near the main temple was

the court of Nemesis, goddess of revenge, justice, and imperial law.

During Christ’s lifetime, the pagan temple butted up against the mouth of the cave that contained a deep pool believed to be the “gates” to the underworld. As sacrifices were tossed into the water, people watched and prayed that their animal would disappear below the surface; only then could they be sure the gods were appeased, and their intentions heard.

About a century after the time of Christ, an earthquake shifted the flow of the water several meters from its original source. The water, tinged red with the blood of sheep and goats, once more ran clear and clean. Today it constitutes fully a quarter of Israel’s water supply. Soon the false temple was in ruins; the “holy goat” was gone, but the memory of the Good Shepherd lived on. Eusebius – fourth-century bishop of Caesarea and historian – recalls seeing a statue of Christ that had once adorned the home of the Phoenician woman, whose “issue of blood” was healed when she touched the hem of the Savior.

It was here (now “Banias”), under the shadow of Pan the false shepherd, that Jesus the True Shepherd brought His disciples to give them one of His most startling revelations. Within eyeshot of “Our Lord the Caesar,” the Lord of Lords named his successor, “Cephas,” and bestowed upon him, as the chief steward, the royal keys of His Kingdom. Beside this hellish portal of false sacrifice, the Lamb of God spoke of a Church that would perpetuate the one true sacrifice, the gateway to eternal life.





Photos in this article courtesy of Steven Ray. This image, which appears in "Nature Reserves and National Parks of Israel: Baniyas and Tel Dan," is a suggested reconstruction of the temples of Baniyas by Shalom Kvell, based on the excavations of Dr. Zvi Maoz.

Have Kids, Will Travel

Today Baniyas is a site of pilgrimage for Christians from all over the world, say Steve and Janet Ray, who have visited the Holy Land forty times, leading many groups.

Since coming into the Church in 1994, Steve and Janet have also taken their children to Israel – the youngest in 1996, when she was only five years old. "The kids were too young at that time to understand a great deal of the history," says Janet. "But they knew the Rosary, and crawled all over the rock in the Garden of Gethsemane, covering it with hugs and kisses."

That they travel so far with small children is even more remarkable in light of the fact that when Jesus made the trip with his disciples, they didn't bring their wives and children along. "It would have held them back too much on their arduous, two-day journey," laughs Steve. But Janet thinks their effort has paid rich dividends in the lives of their children. "It has had a big impact, seeing the history come alive – and they realize that all we have taught them is 'true with a capital T.'"

There are other benefits as well. "Traveling is a great experience for children," says Janet. "It takes them out of rich America and places them in cultures where they have less. Exposing them to a simpler life that is in many ways better – different foods and

languages, fewer conveniences and a greater sense of 'connectedness.' In other parts of the world, family meals are an important part of daily life – the shopping for fresh bread and produce, the cooking of the family meals. Stores shut down and children come home from school. All very different from here, where we demand instant gratification.

"Our travels in Israel reminded me of these experiences. In many ways it was more rustic, of course – at first there were no modern toilets, just a bush or hole in the ground. But by the year 2000 many of the facilities in Israel were

modernized, and in many ways it was very similar to what we experienced in Europe – small stores, simple foods. In Israel they have better fruit juice and yogurt, and have fresher foods in general. While on tour we eat at small places, buffets where we can get typical Palestinian food (we try to support Christian businesses while we can)."

What's it like to go to church in the Middle East? "We love the experience of going to parishes around the world," says Janet. "You see the universality of the Church. The Lord has really blessed us, providentially guiding us to churches even in obscure places. One Sunday morning in Turkey we got in a cab – and found a church right across the street from our hotel. It even had an English-speaking Mass (lots of Filipinos). It really hit home how big and unified the Church is."

Answering the "Scary Questions"

Like many converts, the Rays have family who are not Catholic – and were adamantly opposed to them joining the Church. Janet thought of them as she looked up at the great stone edifice at Baniyas and overheard other church



groups refer disparagingly to “those Catholics” who believe that the “rock” to which Jesus had referred was actually not Peter himself, but Peter’s declaration of faith: “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”

However, this is not the whole story. Jesus responded to Peter by giving him a new identity: The rock, and keeper of the keys of the Kingdom. Explains Steve, “The disciples understood the concept of the royal keys, to which the prophet refers in Isaiah 22. However, the disciples did not fully grasp the prophesy at the time — the Holy Spirit had not yet come. It was a little like looking at an acorn and anticipating the tree.”

So why do so many Christians today miss the significance of those words? And what can we do to draw them out of the shadows and into the light of truth?

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quiet yet powerful ways that the Spirit enables us to cool heated rhetoric, heal wounded hearts, and encourage loved ones to embrace the fullness of the

Gospel. Drawing from her own experiences, Janet advises:

- *Be willing to wait in isolation for a time.* Before they joined the Church, the Rays were very active in their church; after they were confirmed, they lost many friendships and even felt the rejection of family members. How did they respond? “Very gently,” says Janet. At first there was so much hostility that we couldn’t have a conversation.

“However, it didn’t take them long to see the fruit and become accepting. My folks live near the National Shrine of the Cross in the Woods, which has the world’s largest crucifix (www.crossinthewoods.com). One day Mom said, ‘Have you been to the Cross in the Woods? Oh, take the girls – they have a wonderful doll museum.’ She had checked it out herself!



“Steve started praying right away for my parents. We couldn’t talk to them, but we prayed someone else would come to them. A couple of years after *Crossing the Tiber* came out, friends came up to mom. ‘Mary... I just finished this wonderful book by Steve Ray. Have you read it?’ Mom was just shocked. ‘Oh, that’s my son-in-law!’ Their friends — whom they love and respect — respect us. It forced them to see us in a new light.”

Janet is grateful that they didn’t have to wait that long for their children to see the light of truth. “Our children received special graces, which led them to make their own decisions to become Catholic. Our older children were 16 and 13, and at first they wanted to stay in the church where grandma and grandpa were, and didn’t want to discuss it. Then Steve gave our daughter ‘*Crossing the Tiber*’ to proofread – and she came down crying. Our younger children were 2 and 7 at the time, and they loved the Church from the beginning.”

- *Wait for people to be truly “thirsty.”* “At the pilgrimage sites we don’t initiate conversation with non-Catholics,” says Janet. “But we answer their honest questions if we sense that they truly want to hear the answer. We’ve had people attack us with their Protestant beliefs . . . It’s a matter of praying for them, praying for the grace of conversion.”

Closer to home, Janet puts this same principle to practice with her own family. Janet’s parents winter in Mesa, AZ, twenty minutes from where the Rays put together their videos. “That way they get to see what we’re doing. It’s another way the Lord has blessed us. The Lord’s hand is in all this; in His timing, he will bring up opportunities to set the record straight, dispel fears ... we let the Lord work in His good time instead of forcing the issue ourselves.”

- *Practice patient forbearance.* When you encounter a “rock wall” of resistance from a loved one, pray for them to receive grace to move away from the shadows of willful ignorance. Be patient, understanding that their resistance may well be rooted in fear rather than pride. Janet’s own story, like that of many converts, emphasizes this core truth. “We learned from our studies with Francis Schaeffer of the existence of ‘truth with a capital T’. Yet around

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that time we also started seeing inconsistencies in Protestant thought. If truth is so easy and clear, then why can’t Protestants agree – why were there so many different commentaries, so many denominations? There must be something wrong with the method of reading the Scriptures outside history and tradition to form our conclusions.

“In 1979, Schaeffer’s *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* brought abortion to our attention, and we

became involved in the pro-life issues. We came back from L’Abri and were told we couldn’t put out flyers because ‘We aren’t about politics... besides, elders wives are getting abortions and we don’t want to rock the boat.’

“It was difficult for us to make the decision to become Catholic, but God kept putting signs in our path. Al [Kresta] gave us *Evangelical Is Not Enough*, by Tom Howard. In 1993, Frankie Schaeffer (Francis’ son) converted to Orthodoxy and gave a talk in Troy about the ancient Church. We said to each other, ‘I’ll bet we can prove that the Catholic Church is wrong if we read these first Church Fathers ourselves.’ Instead, we were amazed to find that our beliefs weren’t there.”

For Janet Ray, the best thing about visiting the Holy Land as a Catholic Christian is not what she sees, but the affirmation of what she believes. “Going there and seeing these sacred places. Everything fits. I don’t have to hide any more verses in a closet because I can’t figure them out myself. It’s a huge sense of relief and security.” In God’s perfect time, Steve and Janet were able to follow the light of truth from the “faith of their fathers” to the fullest expression of the Christian faith, a journey they measure across miles ... and through the years.

For more information about the Rays and their faith-filled video series, “The Footprints of God,” or to find out more about the next pilgrimage trip, contact them through their website: www.catholicconvert.com. You may also order these videos through Ignatius Press: 1-800-651-1531.

