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By Murray Rundus

In 2023 I traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, a place known for its live country music, the Grand Ole Opry, and Ryman Auditorium. But before Nashville got its reputation for honky-tonk music, it used to be known as the "Athens of the South." A relic of this legacy still stands tall within Centennial Park, as you will find a full-sized replica of the Parthenon. The replica is quite shocking, whether it be its firm columns, perfect symmetry, or the giant statue of Athena within. While this replica may initially seem out of place and a sort of living anachronism, it is perfectly logical why Americanists would desire it to symbolize their city. The Parthenon has become a symbol of Democracy, the ancient paganism of a lost civilization, and the wisdom of old sages. But in reality, the Parthenon was not such an icon for much of its history but rather a beacon of Christianity and devotion to the Mother of God.



The Parthenon Replica in Nashville, Tennessee

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‘Refined’ Barbarity

John Ruskin, whose art criticism is now reviled by moderns but remains esteemed among those who are sane, considered there to be only three good types of architecture respective to the design of their arches. There is the Greek, characterized by the Lintel (flat beam) arches; the Romanesque, characterized by its round arch; and the Gothic, with its pointed arches. Of the Greek Ruskin said it is: “The worst of the three; and, considered with reference to stone construction, always in some measure barbarous. Its simplest type is Stonehenge; its most refined, the Parthenon.”[1]

There is indeed a refined barbarous nature to the great structure that sits atop Athens because it originates from a time of barbarians just beginning to become civilized. Anyone who has read Homer’s *Iliad* knows that the ancient Greeks were not lofty characters but working men of action and function who were capable of great brutality. This comes out in their philosophy as well. *The* Greek philosopher Aristotle was not preoccupied with the ‘philosophy of becoming’ of Heraclitus but spoke preeminently about what *is*. One might look upon the structure and describe it as being grounded, simplistic, and pure, without the need for curvature to give it prominence. It was fitting, then, for the Athenians to dedicate such a pure and prominent space to the patron of their city with the cult of Athena Parthenos, “the Virgin.”

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Eastern icon of the Parthenon as a church

From Pagan to Christian

The architecture of pagan Greek and Roman temples differs from the architecture that developed naturally from the Christian world, namely, the Gothic. This is because they served different purposes. “Most important rituals at temples took place outside, before the altar, while the building itself housed the cult statue of the god.”[2] This difference in function makes it surprising that any of these temples even survived the Christian transformation of the Empire. It would have taken some imagination to envision the transformation of a pagan nest, radically different in function, into a house for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The Athenians were unique in making such transformations while retaining their old heritage, shown by the fact that they kept their namesake as sons of Athena.

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The Athenians had a vision for transforming their temple into a church, though it is not exactly clear when. Evidence suggests that the large statue of Athena was removed in the fifth century A.D., including a pagan biography of a man named Proklos:

"How dear he himself was to the philosopher-goddess is sufficiently established by his choice of the philosophical life, which was such as my account reveals; but the goddess herself also indicated it plainly when her statue, which at that time was situated in the Parthenon, was displaced by those who move even the immovable."[3]

I think the title "those who move even the immovable" is fitting for us Christians, a reminder that our omnipotent God is infinitely more powerful than those of the pagans. Nevertheless, such an account shows that the statue had been removed before the writing of such a text. While this does not necessarily prove that the temple was converted into a Christian church, other factors show that it was converted before the end of the sixth century.

"That the Parthenon was a church as far back as the sixth century is proven by the cemetery which lay along its south side. This region was filled with Christian graves, in some of which were found coins of a date as early as the reign of Justinian."[4]

It would have been astounding to live in Athens at such a time when the darkness of paganism was cast out and true religion erected. As if part of one grand narrative story, the Athenians chose to dedicate the house of the Virgin to the truest Virgin of all, the Blessed Virgin Mary.[5]

A Place for Pilgrimage

Athens as a whole underwent a complete transformation in the new Christian landscape. What used to be a pagan university town quickly transformed into a center for Christian pilgrimage. Athens as a town for schools quickly declined when Emperor Justinian closed the schools in 529. The schools were still a center for paganism and Neoplatonism and these centers were no longer useful for the now-Christian institution of the Roman Empire. But the prominence of Athens didn't disappear, it merely took a new form. It is clear that many people flocked to the Parthenon by the sheer number of inscriptions of this period, but also from the biography of St. Stephen of Sougdaia (eighth century) which states that he "left his homeland and went to Athens because he desired to worship and pray at the church of the Mother of God."[6]

For such a saint to leave all behind to go visit a place in the Byzantine Empire that *wasn't* the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople or Thessalonica implies that Athens was still seen as an important place for pilgrims.

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Imperial Victory

The identity of Athens as a place for pilgrimage was firmly cemented after Emperor Basileios II visited Athens in 1018. This event is often colored by the image of a Roman emperor looking around somberly to find ruins of paganism, a classic example of godless post-Christian historians projecting their worldview on men far greater than them. In reality, the emperor's visit is a clear example of the coherency of religion and culture during the Middle Ages. The Theotokos, at the time, was a military symbol for the Eastern Romans. The emperor would give praise at the Parthenon to the Blessed Virgin for his great victories[7] with the most well-known Eastern hymn, the Akathistos:

"O Champion General, we your faithful inscribe to you the prize of victory as gratitude for being rescued from calamity, O Theotokos. But since you have invincible power, free us from all kinds of perils so that we may cry out to you: Rejoice, O Bride unwedded!"[8]

It is now completely foreign to the modern mind that we might give thanks to God for a great victory. However, the Byzantine emperor was deeply immersed in a Christian atmosphere, which allowed him to be deeply connected to the Communion of the Saints. And so, he went so far as to ascribe his victories over the Bulgarians to the Mother of God and travel to a town dedicated to her to honor her! Have we not lost this sense of locality in regard to our faith? How often do we see our faith confined merely to our parish for Sunday

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Mass?

The Latin Mass and the Parthenon

While the Byzantine Rite would have been celebrated in the Parthenon for much of its history, Byzantine history is quite complicated and contains some events that are still obscure to the majority of people. In the 1200s, a group of Crusaders initially seeking to conquer Jerusalem ended up sacking Constantinople instead. These Crusaders took the Byzantine lands for themselves, establishing Western Catholic realms, most notably the Latin Empire, which controlled Constantinople, and the Dutchy of Athens, which controlled the Athenian regions. Along with Latin court customs came Western Catholic liturgical customs at the Parthenon, with which traditional Latin Catholics today would still feel at home. The establishment of the Roman Archdiocese in Athens survives to this very day. While this is an interesting historical note, the entire Latin conquest of the region was devastating for Christendom. However, it shows that the Parthenon has a universal Christian history for both Western and Eastern Catholics and should be viewed as a landmark of Catholic heritage, rather than humanistic democracy.

The Parthenon's Call

While the Parthenon was unfortunately reduced to ruins after the Venetians and Turks fought over Athens in the 17th century, it remains a definite image of European civilization. It is up to us to determine what precisely that image stands for. Does it stand for idolatry, calling us to keep indulging in illicit pleasures, chasing money, power, and possessions? Does it stand for democracy, the delusion of fools that even the liberal John Stuart Mill admits often devolves into the 'tyranny of the majority'? Or does it stand for that excellent continuity of Christianity with the wise, realist philosophy of Aristotle, the religion that dares to say that it is both reasonable and faithful? It is up to Christendom to choose.

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"He said to him the third time: Simon, son of John, lovest thou me?" (John 21:17)

Habemus Papam
Pope Leo XIV

By Murray Rundus

On May 8, 2025, around 6 p.m. in Rome, crowds began gradually leaving St. Peter's Square. We had been expecting white smoke from the Sistine Chapel, if there was to be any, around 30 minutes earlier, as that is when the Vatican Press Office had told us was the latest approximate time for smoke to appear. It would seem that the Conclave was to move into a fifth round of voting, the same number of votes that it took for Pope Francis to be elected. After filming a short video explaining the number of votes it took, and how this could mean we would see a long conclave that everyone was anticipating, there was a roar from the crowd. As I looked behind me, there was white smoke; a new Pope had been elected. Later in the day than anticipated, but after only four rounds of voting, the number it took to swiftly elect Pope Benedict XVI, the Cardinals managed to elect Pope Leo XIV. There was an initial optimism in the air as it was announced that Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost would be Pope. Some saw him as a complete unknown, but we had reported just that week that he was a likely top-three contender. The Pope came out onto the loggia in the red mozzetta, a tradition neglected by Pope Francis, and immediately he proclaimed the words of the Risen Christ, emphasizing the true and historical nature of the Resurrection but also imploring the crowd to take up a more fervent dedication to Our Lady, all accompanied by his blessing and a plenary indulgence.

What worried me then, and what still worries me, is that the traditional media would fall into what I called at the time a "vibes-based analysis," one based more on emotion than reality itself. This reality showed that the result of this conclave proved that this kind of emotional or instinctual analysis was extremely faulty. Already moving into the Conclave, there were many who were saying they predicted Cardinal Parolin would become Pope because of a feeling of impending doom. Many respectable journalists in Rome only had that much to offer! Those who had been studying the Conclave, in this period of history where we know practically everything about each of the Cardinal electors, knew that Parolin had fallen into disfavor due to the scandals of the China deal, property agreements, and general discontent with his job as Secretary of State. We also knew that the College was relatively more conservative than was being reported, with many of the Cardinals selected by Pope Francis being selected for their identity as being located on the peripheries rather than for their ideological position.[1] This, combined with a number of reports from those who knew the Cardinals well, allowed Vatican analysts, including those of us at *Catholic Family News*, to accurately assess that Cardinal Prevost was indeed a likely contender.



Reading Pope Leo XIV

I believe it to be very important, especially for lay people involved in the traditional movement, to be precise in their reading of the Pontificate of Pope Leo XIV, to avoid emotional responses, and most importantly, to insist on judging our times by clear principles applied with prudence.

The election of Pope Leo XIV has drawn a mix of cautious optimism and vehement criticism from the traditionalist world. While to me it seems the consensus is developing towards optimism, the confusion is somewhat understandable. How is one to react when the predecessor of Pope Leo destroyed many communities and actively concerned himself with disrupting the spiritual lives of so many? There is also a more practical and principled problem as there is now a mix of perspectives under the umbrella term "traditionalist" of those who recognized Pope Francis as a valid Pope and those who did not in various forms, whether saying Benedict

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[1] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. II.

[2] Anthony Kaldellis, *The Christian Parthenon*, p. 23.

[3] Ibid., p. 34.

[4] https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02043b.htm

[5] See Encyclopedia Britannica (11th Ed.) entry on the Parthenon.

[6] See Kaldellis, Chap. 2.

[7] https://web.archive.org/web/20090824170528/http://www.lsa.umich.edu/UMICH/modgreek/Home/_TOPNAV_WTGC/Lectures%20at%20U-M/ParthenonKaldellis.pdf.

[8] https://www.goarch.org/akathisthymn.

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