

WHEN STONES SPEAK

THEOLOGY OF PLACE IN ANATOLIA



THE THRESHOLD JOURNAL

COMPLETE WRITTEN COLLECTION

When Stones Speak

Theology of Place in Anatolia

Fourteen video essays by Ersun Augustinus Kayra
Produced by The Threshold Journal

Contents

This collection presents the complete reading texts prepared for the fourteen-part video essay and podcast series. SSML pauses and pronunciation guides have been removed for a natural reading edition.

EPISODE ONE

The Basilica Beneath Lake Nicaea
Unity, Ruins, and the Work of Christian Memory

EPISODE TWO

Chalcedon: Whole Without Confusion
Christology, Identity, and the Refusal of Erasure

EPISODE THREE

Cappadocia and the Gift of Personhood
Communion, Freedom, and the Human Face

EPISODE FOUR

Ephesus and the Hospitality of Mary
Theotokos, Welcome, and the Courage to Receive

EPISODE FIVE

Antioch: When Scripture Becomes Flesh
History, Interpretation, and the Name “Christian”

EPISODE SIX

The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste
Courage on the Frozen Lake

EPISODE SEVEN

Hagia Sophia and the Education of Wonder
Beauty, Wisdom, and the Human Gaze

EPISODE EIGHT

A Bridge of Reason and Mystery
Istanbul Between East and West

EPISODE NINE

Saint Paul the Tentmaker
Work, Dignity, and Holiness in Tarsus

EPISODE TEN

Saint Nicholas of Myra
Charity, Justice, and the Discipline of Giving

EPISODE ELEVEN

Ani: The Theology of an Empty City
Absence, Memory, and the Refusal to Forget

EPISODE TWELVE

Thekla: The Courage to Answer God’s Call
Vocation, Freedom, and Discernment

EPISODE THIRTEEN

Harran and the Open Tent
Hospitality, Prudence, and the Stranger

EPISODE FOURTEEN

The Land Remembers
A Theology of Place for the Road Ahead

The Basilica Beneath Lake Nicaea

Unity, Ruins, and the Work of Christian Memory

A church lies beneath the waters of Lake Nicaea.

Its walls are broken. Its roof has disappeared. Fish pass through the space where a Christian community once gathered for prayer. The lake has not preserved a complete monument. It has preserved a fragment, visible from above and unreachable in the ordinary way.

The image is almost too perfect. Nicaea is remembered throughout the Christian world as the city of the council held in the year 325, when bishops met amid deep controversy to confess the Son as truly divine. Yet the basilica beneath the lake is not the council hall, and archaeology cannot be made to prove every story we wish to tell. The building appears to belong to a later period. Its precise dedication and history continue to require careful study.

That distinction matters. Faith does not become stronger when tradition, archaeology, and imagination are blurred together. The real history is already profound enough.

Nicaea asks what remains when a great confession survives but the communities that carried it become divided. Christians still recite a creed shaped by the theological labour of the fourth century. Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and many Protestants speak words that place Jesus Christ within the mystery of the one God. We inherit a language of unity while living inside a history of separation.

The council did not solve every conflict. It did not create a permanent age of harmony. Its decisions were followed by decades of argument, exile, political pressure, and further clarification. Christian unity was never the product of a single meeting. It required patience, courage, and the willingness to distinguish the mystery of God from the ambitions of those who spoke in God's name.

This is why the submerged basilica can become a moral image without becoming an archaeological slogan. Unity cannot survive on monuments alone. It must be received again through humility.

The water covering the ruins does not erase them. It changes the way we approach them. We must slow down, look carefully, and accept that some things cannot be possessed. The past is visible, but not completely available. Memory therefore becomes a form of responsibility.

Ecumenism begins in a similar way. It does not begin by pretending that differences are small or that history has left no wounds. It begins when Christians refuse to treat separation as normal. It asks us to learn the language, prayers, fears, and gifts of communities other than our own. It also asks each tradition to examine the habits that make reconciliation more difficult.

For a Catholic, the search for unity is not an optional gesture of courtesy. It belongs to the Church's vocation. Yet unity cannot be built through domination. It must be ordered towards truth, conversion, mutual recognition, and communion in Christ.

The lake offers no easy ending. The basilica remains below the surface. The churches remain divided. But Christian hope is not the denial of fracture. It is the refusal to believe that fracture has the final word.

Nicaea leaves us with a question. What would it mean to confess one faith while becoming people capable of reconciliation?

Perhaps the answer begins by approaching memory as we approach the ruins beneath the water: without conquest, without haste, and with enough humility to see what has endured.

Chalcedon: Whole Without Confusion

Christology, Identity, and the Refusal of Erasure

Modern Kadıköy is alive with ferries, markets, traffic, conversation, and the movement of a city that rarely pauses. The ancient name of this place was Chalcedon.

In 451, bishops gathered here to speak about Jesus Christ. Their language became famous for a sequence of careful refusals: without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation.

The Council of Chalcedon confessed Christ as one person in two natures, truly divine and truly human. The formulation did not explain the mystery away. It protected the Church from reducing Christ to one side of the truth.

If the humanity of Christ is swallowed by divinity, then human life appears to be only a costume God briefly wears. If divinity is separated from humanity, then the person of Christ is broken into competing subjects. Chalcedon refuses both solutions.

The Word who is eternally with God truly enters hunger, fatigue, friendship, suffering, and death. The one born of Mary is not a divided figure. In Christ, difference does not require separation, and unity does not require erasure.

This is first a doctrine about Christ. It should not be turned carelessly into a slogan for psychology or politics. Yet doctrine forms a moral imagination. Chalcedon teaches Christians to distrust every unity built by destroying what is distinct, and every difference defended by denying relationship.

Modern life repeatedly offers those false choices. A person is told to dissolve into a group, or to treat every bond as a threat to freedom. A minority is welcomed only if it becomes invisible. A family demands closeness by suppressing honest difference. An institution praises teamwork while rewarding silence.

The Chalcedonian pattern resists these distortions. Communion is not absorption. Integrity is not isolation.

To remain whole requires boundaries. But healthy boundaries are not walls against every claim of love. They protect the conditions in which relationship can become truthful. A person who cannot say no cannot offer a free yes. A community that cannot acknowledge difference cannot sustain genuine unity.

The same discipline matters in theological dialogue. Christians do not serve communion by pretending that doctrines are interchangeable. Nor do they serve truth by using doctrine as a weapon against the dignity of another person. Clarity and charity belong together because the truth Christians confess is not an abstraction. It is the person of Christ.

Chalcedon also reminds us that language reaches its limit. The council's four adverbs do not describe how the mystery works. They guard a space in which worship can remain faithful. Sometimes the most responsible sentence is one that prevents a mystery from being simplified.

This matters in a culture of instant explanations. We are encouraged to label quickly, choose a camp, and turn complicated persons into a single trait. But a human life cannot be understood through reduction. Each person is embodied, relational, historical, and open to God.

To say this is not to place human identity on the same level as the mystery of Christ. It is to allow Christology to educate our attention.

In the crowded streets of Kadıköy, little remains of the council that gave Chalcedon its place in Christian memory. Yet its central refusal still speaks.

Do not confuse what must remain distinct.

Do not divide what is called into communion.

Wholeness is not achieved by erasing difference. And difference does not have to become exile.

Cappadocia and the Gift of Personhood

Communion, Freedom, and the Human Face

Cappadocia seems shaped by withdrawal. Valleys open into silence. Rooms are cut into rock. Churches, cells, kitchens, and passages disappear into the landscape.

Yet the theology associated with this region is not a theology of the isolated self.

In the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa helped the Church speak more clearly about the Trinity. They defended the confession of one God in three persons and refined a language capable of honouring unity without collapsing distinction.

Their work emerged from controversy, prayer, friendship, pastoral responsibility, and disagreement. Theology was not produced by detached minds floating above history. It grew within relationships.

The word person has a long and complicated history, and modern ideas cannot simply be projected backwards. Still, the Cappadocian achievement helped Christian thought recognise that relation is not a weakness added to being. Within the mystery of God, communion is not secondary.

This changes the way we imagine human dignity.

Modern culture often presents the self as private property. Freedom means needing no one. Maturity means becoming invulnerable. Dependence appears embarrassing, and obligation is treated as an interruption of personal choice.

But no one gives himself life, language, memory, or a face. We receive existence before we can organise it. We become recognisable through relationships that precede our consent.

This does not mean that every relationship is good. Communities can wound, families can control, and religious language can be used to demand submission. Communion without freedom becomes coercion. The Cappadocian vision cannot justify the disappearance of the person into the group.

Nor can freedom mean escape from all belonging. A person is not most fully alive when no one can make a claim upon him. Freedom becomes human when it can answer truth, love, and responsibility.

Basil's response to famine offers a concrete example. His theology did not remain inside elegant formulas. It entered questions of hunger, wealth, care, and the organisation of a community capable of receiving the sick and the poor. The neighbour was not an optional addition to spiritual life.

The rock-cut churches of Cappadocia make this insight visible. A cell creates space for solitude, but a monastery orders solitude towards prayer and communion. Silence is not meant to make other people unreal. It should free attention from the noise that prevents us from receiving them.

Today, loneliness is often hidden behind constant connection. We can communicate without being known and display ourselves without becoming available. The language of personhood asks a more demanding question: who becomes more fully alive because I am present?

At work, it may mean refusing to treat a colleague as a function. In family life, it may mean allowing another person to remain different without withdrawing love. In public life, it means building institutions that recognise persons rather than only users, customers, cases, or numbers.

Christian faith does not teach that the human person is divine. It teaches that every person is created in the image of God and called into communion. Dignity is therefore not earned through productivity, intelligence, health, status, or usefulness.

Cappadocia's landscape appears carved by subtraction. Stone is removed so that a place of dwelling can emerge.

Perhaps spiritual formation works in a similar way. We surrender the illusion of self-sufficiency, the need to dominate, and the fear that another person's gift diminishes our own.

What remains is not emptiness.

It is room for communion.

Ephesus and the Hospitality of Mary

Theotokos, Welcome, and the Courage to Receive

Ephesus carries many layers of memory. Marble streets lead towards a theatre, a library façade, homes, temples, and the remains of Christian worship. The city belongs to more than one chapter of history.

For Christians, Ephesus is associated with Saint Paul, the Johannine tradition, and the council held in 431. That council defended the title Theotokos for Mary: the one who gave birth to God.

The title does not make Mary the origin of Christ's divinity. It protects the unity of the person she bore. The child born of her is not one person beside the eternal Word. He is the Word made flesh.

Marian doctrine therefore points beyond Mary while revealing the significance of her response. She receives a vocation she did not design. Her yes is free, embodied, risky, and open to a future she cannot control.

This is why Mary can become an icon of hospitality.

Hospitality is often reduced to politeness, decoration, or the efficient management of guests. Biblical hospitality is more demanding. It creates room for a presence capable of changing the household.

To receive another person is not to possess them. It is to make space without erasing difference. It requires attention, boundaries, and a willingness to be interrupted.

The traditions surrounding Mary's final years near Ephesus developed over time, and the House of the Virgin Mary visited today cannot be treated as simple historical proof. Pilgrimage, local devotion, archaeology, and documented history must be distinguished.

Yet the site's quiet power does not depend upon certainty about every detail. It gathers people around a question: what does it mean to receive the presence of God into ordinary life?

Mary's hospitality is not passive submission. In the Gospel of Luke, she questions, consents, travels, sings, remembers, and remains. Her Magnificat names the reversal of unjust power. The one who receives also speaks.

This corrects a dangerous use of religious language. Welcome must never mean accepting abuse, concealing harm, or surrendering conscience. Christian hospitality protects the dignity of host and guest alike. A door can be open without becoming defenceless.

In contemporary life, hospitality may begin with small acts. A parish notices the person standing alone after Mass. A family makes room for a neighbour without turning generosity into display. An institution translates essential information so that a newcomer is not humiliated. A believer listens before deciding what another person needs.

These gestures are ordinary, but they resist a culture that sorts people according to convenience. They affirm that another life may carry a gift we cannot receive while remaining closed.

Ephesus also warns us that sacred language can become a battlefield. The council was surrounded by intense controversy, rivalries, and political pressure. Truth matters, but the defence of truth does not automatically purify every method used in its name.

The title Theotokos endured because it guarded the truth about Christ. Its moral echo asks whether our own convictions lead us towards greater reverence for embodied life.

Mary does not fill the centre with herself. She receives, bears, and presents Christ.

Hospitality at its deepest is not the art of making everything familiar. It is the courage to make room for a presence that may transform us.

Among the ruins of Ephesus, that courage remains close enough to touch.

Antioch: When Scripture Becomes Flesh

History, Interpretation, and the Name “Christian”

Antioch was one of the great cities of the ancient Mediterranean. Trade, languages, religions, and imperial power met along its streets. The city was brilliant, unstable, creative, and repeatedly wounded by earthquakes, conquest, and change.

The Acts of the Apostles remembers Antioch as the place where the disciples were first called Christians. It became a centre of mission and a community in which Jewish and Gentile believers had to discover what belonging to Christ would require.

The name Christian was not born in isolation. It emerged in a mixed city where faith became publicly recognisable.

Antioch also gave Christian interpretation a distinctive discipline. The tradition associated with the city insisted that Scripture has history, grammar, speakers, audiences, and real human circumstances. A biblical text is not a collection of symbols floating above time.

This attention does not eliminate spiritual meaning. It protects spiritual reading from becoming fantasy.

The Word became flesh. Christian interpretation must therefore respect the flesh of language: its context, form, limits, and particularity.

This principle is urgently needed. Religious texts can be made to say almost anything when a sentence is removed from its setting. A verse becomes a weapon. A promise becomes a slogan. A story addressed to a particular community is turned into permission for power.

Responsible reading begins with humility. Who is speaking? To whom? What kind of text is this? What world does it assume? How has the Church received it? What does the wider witness of Scripture prevent us from claiming?

These questions do not weaken faith. They discipline the reader so that private certainty does not masquerade as the voice of God.

Antioch’s Christian memory also resists the temptation to separate Scripture from neighbours. The city in Acts is a place of shared worship, conflict, famine relief, discernment, and mission. Interpretation becomes credible when it forms a community capable of responsibility.

To read about the stranger while refusing the stranger is a failure of interpretation. To speak of the Body of Christ while humiliating one of its members is to contradict the text with our lives.

Modern Antakya carries another layer of this lesson. The devastation of the 2023 earthquakes cannot be used as scenery for a theological idea. Grief belongs first to the people who lost homes, relatives, workplaces, streets, and familiar worlds. Memory must approach suffering without taking possession of it.

Here, a theology of place becomes accountable. Ancient importance does not make present pain less urgent. Stones matter because people matter. Preservation, rebuilding, truth-telling, and solidarity belong together.

The name Christian can become familiar enough to lose its demand. Antioch returns it to public life. A Christian is not simply a person who holds private opinions about God. The name identifies a relationship to Christ that should become visible in worship, conduct, mercy, courage, and the way difference is received.

Scripture becomes flesh when it enters a life without being reduced to that life's preferences. It judges, consoles, interrupts, and forms a people.

Antioch asks whether our reading makes Christ recognisable or merely makes ourselves louder.

The city where the name first became public still places a question before the Church: when others encounter the way we read, speak, and live, what meaning does the word Christian acquire?

The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste

Courage on the Frozen Lake

Winter changes the sound of Sivas.

Snow quiets the streets. Breath becomes visible. Water hardens, and the body learns how quickly cold can turn courage into fear.

Long before the city was called Sivas, it was known as Sebaste. From this place comes the story of forty soldiers who discovered that courage can be shared.

The tradition places their martyrdom in the early fourth century, during the rule of Licinius. They were soldiers in the Roman army and Christians. When ordered to offer sacrifice and deny their faith, they refused.

The earliest surviving witness comes from Saint Basil the Great, who preached about them only decades later. Later accounts remember the men being exposed on a frozen lake outside Sebaste. A heated bath stood nearby, offering warmth to anyone willing to abandon the others.

The scene is severe: darkness, ice, exhausted bodies, and the possibility of escape.

Tradition says that one man eventually left the group. A guard watching from the shore was moved by what he witnessed and joined those who remained, restoring their number to forty.

The details reached us through preaching and sacred memory, but their central meaning is clear.

The martyrs were not remembered as forty unrelated heroes who happened to die together. They became one witness.

Their courage passed between them through prayer, presence, and the refusal to let fear have the final word.

Christian martyrdom is not the pursuit of pain. The Church does not honour cruelty, romanticise death, or teach believers to seek destruction.

A martyr is a witness: someone whose fidelity reveals that life cannot be reduced to survival at any price.

Yet Sebaste adds another insight. Sometimes a person remains faithful because another person is still standing nearby.

Modern culture often imagines courage as an individual possession. We picture the solitary hero who needs no reassurance and no one to share the cost. But most moral courage is more dependent.

A nurse speaks because a colleague confirms what she has seen. A civil servant refuses deception because someone else preserves the record. A believer endures because a community continues to pray.

Institutions can weaken conscience by isolating people. They can make each person believe that everyone else agrees or that asking a question will end a career. Silence then spreads until it appears to be consent.

But courage can also spread. One honest voice allows another to emerge. A leader who receives criticism without retaliation can change the moral atmosphere of a community.

Sebaste asks whether our institutions admire courage after the crisis—or create conditions in which courage can survive before it arrives.

Saint Paul described the Church as one body with many members. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one is honoured, all rejoice together.

Another person's fear concerns us. Their burden enters our responsibility. No member of the Body of Christ is disposable, and no conscience should be abandoned because its warning is inconvenient.

Numbers can make suffering abstract. Forty soldiers. Forty names. Forty deaths.

Christian memory resists reducing persons to statistics. Each life was particular, each decision costly, and each person received by God.

Perhaps this is the deepest meaning of the lake. The cold separated each person within the limits of his own body. But prayer created a bond the cold could not dissolve.

We may never stand on a frozen lake. Yet we know other forms of coldness: isolation, institutional indifference, fear of exclusion, and the calculation that tells us to protect ourselves while someone else bears the cost.

Sebaste offers no easy promise that courage will remove suffering. It offers something more human: we do not have to face the moral night alone.

Sometimes holiness takes the form of refusing to leave one another in the cold.

Hagia Sophia and the Education of Wonder

Beauty, Wisdom, and the Human Gaze

Hagia Sophia changes as the light changes.

The dome appears to hover. Gold, stone, shadow, calligraphy, marble, and human movement gather beneath a space larger than any single explanation of it.

The present building was completed in 537 under Emperor Justinian. Its architects, Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus, joined geometry, engineering, material, and light in a work that has survived earthquakes, repairs, conquest, and repeated changes of use.

It has been a church, a mosque, a museum, and once again a mosque. Each period has left marks. To speak responsibly about Hagia Sophia is therefore to resist pretending that only one layer exists.

For Christians, the building carries the memory of worship, councils, empire, division, and loss. For Muslims, it carries centuries of prayer and Ottoman history. For the world, it is an architectural inheritance of extraordinary significance.

These meanings do not fit together without tension. Respect does not require the erasure of grief, and grief does not justify contempt for the devotion of another community.

The name Hagia Sophia means Holy Wisdom. It does not name a saint called Sophia. It directs attention towards the divine Wisdom Christians associate with the Word of God.

The building teaches through beauty, but beauty must be approached carefully. Magnificence can open the human person to wonder. It can also serve power, wealth, and imperial ambition. A sacred building does not automatically make every action within its history holy.

Still, beauty can educate desire.

We live among images designed to seize attention quickly. Their purpose is often to provoke, sell, or keep us scrolling. Hagia Sophia works differently. Its scale slows the gaze. Its light refuses complete control. The eye rises, then returns to the people standing below.

Christian beauty is not decoration added after truth. At its best, it makes truth perceptible without reducing it to an argument. A hymn, an icon, a proportion, or a shaft of light can prepare the heart to receive what explanation alone cannot carry.

This does not mean that beauty is proof. Beautiful things can deceive, and ugly realities can be hidden behind splendour. Discernment remains necessary.

But a culture unable to recognise beauty becomes vulnerable to another kind of poverty. It may know the price of materials while forgetting why human beings build spaces that exceed utility.

Hagia Sophia therefore asks what our buildings teach us to love. Do they make persons feel disposable, hurried, and small? Or do they create room for attention, memory, reverence, and shared presence?

The question reaches beyond architecture. A parish can be visually splendid and relationally cold. A modest room can become beautiful through care, welcome, and truthful prayer. Beauty becomes Christian when it serves communion rather than display.

The building's layered history also teaches humility. No community owns the past completely. We receive places shaped by people who prayed differently, exercised power differently, and carried wounds we may not fully understand.

To look upward beneath the dome is not to escape history. It is to see history under a greater horizon.

Wisdom begins when wonder does not end in possession. It becomes gratitude, truthfulness, and responsibility.

Hagia Sophia still raises the human gaze. The question is what kind of life we live when our eyes return to the ground.

A Bridge of Reason and Mystery

Istanbul Between East and West

Istanbul is often called a bridge between East and West.

The phrase is repeated so often that it can lose its meaning.

But a bridge is not merely a pleasant view. It carries weight. It joins shores that remain distinct, stands above moving water, and endures pressure from both sides.

To live on a bridge is to inhabit a threshold.

For a lay Catholic living in Istanbul, this threshold is not abstract. Church bells sound within a city shaped by the call to prayer. Latin, Byzantine, Armenian, Syriac, and Turkish memories share streets without always sharing the same story.

Here, Christianity is ancient, wounded, living, and often quiet. This can become a vocation: to listen across boundaries without losing the ground beneath one's feet.

East and West are sometimes described too simply. The West is associated with reason, law, definition, and structure. The East is associated with mystery, contemplation, liturgy, and spiritual breath.

These descriptions contain some truth, but become false when treated as opposites. The Christian East has produced rigorous theology. The Christian West has produced profound mysticism.

Reason without wonder becomes narrow. Mystery without discernment becomes vague. The Church needs clarity and contemplation, doctrine and doxology, structure and breath.

Saint John Paul II described Eastern and Western Christianity as the two lungs of the Church. Yet breathing together does not mean erasing difference. Communion is not uniformity, and Catholicity is not a colourless middle where every tradition loses its voice.

Catholic unity can receive many languages, rites, histories, and spiritual gifts while remaining centred on Christ.

A bridge does not abolish the shores. It makes encounter possible.

Such encounter requires more than formal dialogue. The Second Vatican Council teaches that lay people seek the Kingdom of God within the ordinary affairs of the world. Their vocation unfolds within family, work, education, culture, and public responsibility.

The bridge is therefore built by ordinary choices. A teacher protects the dignity of a minority child. A neighbour learns the feast days of another community. A worker refuses a joke built on contempt. A family practises hospitality without demanding sameness.

A bridge also needs foundations. Openness without conviction becomes confusion. Conviction without humility becomes a wall.

Christian dialogue asks us to speak truthfully without domination, listen without pretending differences are unimportant, and remain faithful without turning faith into a weapon.

The goal is not victory over the other. It is conversion towards Christ, who is greater than every culture through which we understand him.

Anatolia knows what happens when communities forget this. Its stones carry memories of councils and monasteries, but also expulsions, silences, abandoned sanctuaries, and names no longer spoken.

Living memory does not imprison us within grievance. Nor does it permit convenient forgetting. Reconciliation begins when suffering can be named without being exploited, and inherited wounds are met with truth, repentance, and patience.

A bridge built over hidden pain will eventually fracture.

The task is not to stand above East and West as a judge. It is to stand between them as a servant.

To receive before speaking. To translate without betraying. To offer reason without coldness. Mystery without obscurity. Memory without captivity. Faith without domination. And hope without denial.

No single culture exhausts the Gospel. Both East and West need the humility to receive gifts from the other.

A bridge is faithful not because it belongs to neither shore, but because it allows both shores to meet without ceasing to be themselves.

Saint Paul the Tentmaker

Work, Dignity, and Holiness in Tarsus

Tarsus was already ancient when Saint Paul called it his home.

The city stood within networks of trade, education, empire, and cultural exchange. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul identifies himself as a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city. He also belongs to a tradition of skilled labour.

Acts tells us that Paul worked with Aquila and Priscilla because they shared a trade. They were tentmakers, or workers in the leather and woven materials used for shelters.

The image gives us Paul's needle.

We often remember the apostle through journeys, letters, arguments, prisons, and preaching. The needle returns him to the rhythm of ordinary work: measuring, cutting, stitching, repairing, selling, and beginning again.

Christian holiness is not reserved for visibly religious activity. Work can become a place of service, discipline, creativity, solidarity, and participation in the care of the world.

But work is not holy simply because it is difficult. Exploitation does not become virtuous when religious language is placed over it. A wage can be unjust. A workplace can humiliate. Productivity can be turned into an idol that consumes health, family life, prayer, and rest.

The dignity of work comes from the dignity of the worker, not the other way around. A person does not earn the right to matter by becoming useful.

Paul's labour also complicates our idea of independence. He sometimes worked so that he would not burden a community. At other times, he received support from believers. Self-support and mutual assistance were not enemies. Both could serve the mission when ordered by love and prudence.

This balance matters today. We praise self-reliance, yet every form of work depends upon others: those who teach, transport, clean, repair, care, organise, and sustain the systems around us. The most celebrated labour rests upon work that may remain unseen.

A theology of work therefore asks who is invisible. Who cleans after the meeting ends? Who carries risk while another receives recognition? Whose time is treated as endlessly available? Who cannot refuse an unsafe demand?

To honour work requires more than praising effort. It requires just structures, honest contracts, adequate rest, safe conditions, and the possibility of moral agency.

Paul's needle can also become a practice of attention. Skilled work teaches that small failures matter. A weak seam may not be visible immediately, but pressure will reveal it. Character is formed in similar ways. The habits no one applauds prepare us for the responsibilities that later become public.

This does not mean that every task must feel meaningful. Much work is repetitive, tiring, or chosen because a household needs income. Christian faith should not romanticise exhaustion.

Sometimes the moral demand is not to find beauty in a bad system, but to change the conditions that make people disposable.

Yet even ordinary labour can resist contempt. The person who prepares food carefully, keeps an accurate record, repairs what others discard, or gives full attention to a patient performs more than a function. Such work protects a human world.

Tarsus asks whether we can recognise holiness in the hand that keeps moving after the dramatic moment has passed.

Paul's mission crossed seas and empires. It also passed through a workshop.

The needle reminds us that vocation is not only where we go. It is the faithfulness with which we handle what has been placed before us.

Saint Nicholas of Myra

Charity, Justice, and the Discipline of Giving

Myra is a city of stone, sea routes, tombs, and layered memory.

Yet its most famous bishop has become almost weightless in the modern imagination. Saint Nicholas travels across advertisements, winter decorations, and childhood stories until the historical place that formed him nearly disappears.

The real Nicholas is difficult to reconstruct in detail. He was a bishop of Myra in late antiquity, remembered by the Church for holiness, generosity, and care for the vulnerable. Many familiar stories developed across centuries of devotion.

The most enduring tells of a poor father unable to provide dowries for his daughters. Nicholas gives secretly, preserving the family from destitution and exploitation.

Whether every detail can be verified is not the only question tradition asks. The story has endured because it gives generosity a moral shape.

Nicholas does not give in order to become the centre of the scene. He gives in a way that protects the dignity of those who receive.

This is more difficult than it appears.

Charity can become a performance. The giver controls the story, displays the recipient, and turns another person's need into evidence of personal virtue. Help is offered, but dignity is taken.

The tradition of Nicholas resists this. Hidden giving places the need of the other before the reputation of the giver.

Yet secrecy alone does not make charity just. A gift can relieve immediate suffering while leaving the conditions that produced it untouched. Christian love must be personal, but it cannot remain indifferent to structures.

If a worker cannot live on a wage, generosity after the fact does not excuse exploitation before it. If a family is hungry because a system excludes them, food matters urgently, but so do the decisions that keep the exclusion in place.

Justice and charity are not rivals. Justice asks what is owed. Charity gives with love and sometimes beyond what can be demanded. Without justice, charity risks becoming a decoration placed over harm. Without love, justice can become cold administration.

Nicholas is also remembered in stories of intervention on behalf of the falsely accused. Here generosity becomes courage. The bishop does not merely distribute resources; he places his authority between vulnerable persons and an unjust outcome.

This expands the meaning of giving. We can give money, but also attention, credibility, protection, time, access, and the willingness to speak when silence would be safer.

Myra therefore asks us to examine not only how much we give, but what our giving does.

Does it increase another person's freedom, or create dependence upon our approval? Does it respond to what is actually needed, or to the story we prefer to tell? Does it preserve privacy? Does it listen? Does it confront the injustice that makes the gift necessary?

Christian generosity begins in grace. We give because life has first been given to us. But gratitude is not complete until it becomes responsible.

The commercial figure derived from Saint Nicholas is associated with endless consumption. The bishop of Myra points in the opposite direction. He teaches that abundance is measured by the capacity to release what we possess for the sake of another person's dignity.

His memory returns gift-giving to the moral life.

A true gift does not make the recipient smaller. It creates room for a life to stand.

Ani: The Theology of an Empty City

Absence, Memory, and the Refusal to Forget

Ani stands near a border, open to wind and distance.

Broken walls, churches, a cathedral, fragments of streets, and the remains of a once-crowded city stretch across the plateau. The silence is powerful because the place was not always silent.

Ani became a medieval Armenian capital and a major centre of trade, architecture, and Christian life. Its buildings reveal artistic ambition and a community confident enough to shape stone at scale.

Today, absence is the first thing many visitors feel.

But absence is not emptiness. An empty church can carry the memory of prayer. A ruined doorway can reveal that generations once entered, waited, celebrated, mourned, and returned home.

The danger is to turn ruins into beautiful scenery while making the people who built them disappear.

Living memory restores particularity. It speaks names. It recognises Armenian Christian inheritance. It refuses to flatten a complex history into a harmless image of the past.

This does not mean using memory as a weapon against people living today. Honest remembrance and inherited hostility are not the same. Memory becomes morally serious when it serves truth, lament, dignity, and the possibility of reconciliation.

Ani has known political change, conflict, earthquakes, abandonment, and neglect. No single cause explains its silence. Responsible attention does not force every century into one story.

The cathedral offers a striking lesson. Its architect, Trdat, created a space in which structure and vertical movement draw the eye forward and upward. Even without the life that once filled it, the building continues to shape attention.

What happens to sacred space when the congregation is gone?

Christian faith does not teach that God is trapped inside a building. Yet buildings matter because bodies matter. We need places in which memory can be practised, words can be repeated, grief can be held, and strangers can gather.

When such places are lost, the loss is more than architectural. A community's rhythm, visibility, and confidence can also disappear.

This is why preservation is not merely technical. Decisions about which buildings receive care express decisions about whose history is allowed to remain visible.

The same question appears in cities everywhere. A place of worship closes. A neighbourhood changes through migration. A cemetery is neglected. A name is translated, replaced, or forgotten. None of these changes has only one meaning, but each deserves attention.

Ani teaches that silence must be interpreted. Sometimes silence protects prayer. Sometimes it is the result of absence. Sometimes it conceals a history that became uncomfortable to name.

The Christian response is not to fill every silence with accusation. It is to refuse convenient forgetting.

Lament makes this possible. Lament does not deny beauty, and it does not require a simplified past. It allows love to remain truthful in the presence of loss.

At Ani, the wind moves through openings where windows and doors once stood. The city cannot speak for itself. We decide whether its memory will become tourism, nostalgia, grievance, scholarship, prayer, or responsibility.

The most faithful answer may hold several of these without confusing them.

Absence becomes empty only when no one is willing to remember truthfully.

Ani remains because memory can carry a presence that possession cannot recover.

Thekla: The Courage to Answer God's Call

Vocation, Freedom, and Discernment

The road from ancient Iconium, modern Konya, towards Seleucia near present-day Silifke carries the memory of Thekla.

Her story comes to us principally through the Acts of Paul and Thecla, an early Christian work outside the New Testament. It should not be read as straightforward biography or treated as Scripture. Yet its wide reception reveals the power of the questions it carries.

Thekla hears Paul preach and becomes convinced that her life belongs first to God. This decision places her in conflict with the expectations arranged around her. The story remembers threats, deliverance, teaching, and a woman whose vocation cannot be contained by the future others have chosen for her.

At the centre is freedom.

A Christian vocation is never permission for another person to take control of a life. God's call does not abolish conscience, discernment, or consent. Religious authority becomes corrupt when it manipulates fear, demands secrecy, or treats obedience as the surrender of moral agency.

Thekla's memory is therefore especially important wherever women's voices have been received only when they remain convenient.

Her courage is not simply the rejection of family or society. It is the recognition that every human relationship stands under a greater truth. No person can claim the place that belongs to God.

Yet freedom is not the same as impulse. A vocation requires discernment.

Discernment listens to desire, but also tests it. Does this path deepen truth, charity, humility, and responsibility? Can it be spoken openly to wise companions? Does it respect the dignity of others? Does it allow correction? Does it produce freedom, or dependence upon a charismatic figure?

These questions matter because spiritual language can intensify both grace and harm. A person who says "God told me" may be expressing a genuine conviction, or may be protecting a private preference from examination.

The Church discerns vocation within prayer, community, Scripture, tradition, and the concrete duties of life. No single feeling bears the whole weight.

The cave associated with Thekla near Silifke became a place of pilgrimage. Its historical layers are complex, but the image of the cave remains fitting. A cave can shelter, conceal, and create distance from the noise that defines us.

Withdrawal, however, is not the goal of vocation. Thekla is remembered because she emerges as a witness.

This is the pattern of Christian solitude. We step away in order to hear more clearly, then return with a freedom capable of service.

Many people today experience vocation less dramatically. A nurse recognises a duty to protect patients. A teacher discovers patience for students others dismiss. A parent reshapes ambition around the care of a child. A young person senses a call to prayer, ministry, scholarship, or a form of public responsibility.

The call may not arrive as certainty. Often it becomes visible through repeated fidelity.

Thekla's story should not be used to glorify danger or isolation. Courage includes seeking help, recognising manipulation, and leaving situations that destroy dignity.

The deepest obedience is not obedience to pressure. It is a free response to truth.

Perhaps the cave near Silifke still asks the simplest question.

What voice is shaping the life you are becoming—and does that voice make you more free to love?

Harran and the Open Tent

Hospitality, Prudence, and the Stranger

Harran opens beneath a wide sky.

Roads, trade, learning, migration, and religious memory have crossed this plain for centuries. The biblical city of Haran belongs to the story of Abraham's journey: a place of departure before the call continues towards an unknown land.

The famous scene of Abraham receiving strangers beneath the oaks of Mamre occurs later and elsewhere. Harran should not be made to carry a story geography does not give it.

Yet the landscape of departure can still lead us towards the biblical discipline of hospitality. Abraham's life is marked by tents, journeys, vulnerability, promise, and encounters in which the stranger may arrive bearing more than the host understands.

Hospitality begins with availability.

An open tent interrupts the fantasy that safety comes from complete enclosure. It admits that human life depends upon receiving and being received.

But an open entrance is not the absence of prudence. Hospitality does not require people to ignore danger, abandon boundaries, or expose the vulnerable to harm. The stranger has dignity, and so does the household.

Christian ethics must hold welcome and discernment together.

Fear can close every door. Naivety can leave people unprotected. Prudence asks how love can become concrete within real conditions.

Sometimes hospitality means food, shelter, or legal assistance. Sometimes it means accurate information, a patient conversation, or the refusal to let a newcomer become invisible. In a parish, it may be as simple as noticing who does not know when to stand, where to sit, or whom to ask.

Institutions also practise hospitality. A hospital can receive a patient as a person or process a body as a problem. A school can treat language difference as deficiency or create a path into belonging. A city can organise public space so that strangers remain threatening abstractions, or so that ordinary encounter becomes possible.

Hospitality is therefore not only private kindness. It has architecture, procedures, budgets, and laws.

The biblical command to welcome the stranger is rooted in memory: you know the heart of the stranger because you were strangers. Memory becomes an ethical resource when it prevents comfort from erasing dependence.

Yet hospitality should not become self-congratulation. The host does not own the guest's story. To welcome another person is not to demand gratitude, agreement, assimilation, or emotional intimacy.

Nor is the stranger always poor. A stranger may carry wisdom, correction, and a gift the household lacks. In the story of Genesis 18, Abraham's welcome opens into revelation and promise. The host discovers that he is also a recipient.

This reverses the usual hierarchy of charity. We are never only givers. Every act of welcome places us near the possibility of being changed.

Harran's history is not a single religious story. It includes ancient Mesopotamian worship, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, scholarship, commerce, and modern life. Responsible attention receives this plurality without pretending that all differences disappear.

The open tent is not a colourless space. It has a centre, a household, and practices that make welcome possible. Identity need not be erased for encounter to occur.

After travelling through the memories of Anatolia, Harran gives us a final discipline before the season closes: remain reachable.

Do not allow prudence to harden into fear. Do not allow openness to become careless. Prepare a place in which truth and welcome can meet.

The stranger at the entrance may carry a need. The stranger may also carry a blessing.

The Land Remembers

A Theology of Place for the Road Ahead

At dawn, Anatolia does not appear as a single story.

Water covers forgotten foundations. Roads cross plains once travelled by pilgrims and exiles. Domes rise above crowded streets, while broken arches remain open to the sky. The land holds beauty, conflict, prayer, abandonment, and hope.

Throughout this season, we have asked whether places can remember.

Stones do not speak as human beings do. But they can interrupt convenient forgetting. They return theology to the world in which faith was argued, wounded, and lived.

Christianity is not an escape from geography. The Word became flesh, entered history, and dwelt among us. A theology of place begins there.

Beneath the waters of Nicaea, we learned that unity cannot survive on monuments alone. It must be received again through humility.

In Chalcedon, remaining whole—without confusion and without division—became a way of resisting both isolation and erasure.

In Cappadocia, the human person emerged not as a solitary possession, but as a life received in relationship.

Ephesus offered the quiet hospitality of Mary. Antioch returned Scripture to language, history, and flesh. The frozen memory of Sebaste showed that courage can pass between people.

Hagia Sophia lifted the gaze, reminding us that beauty can open questions argument alone cannot reach. Istanbul taught that a bridge is a form of service strong enough to carry encounter.

In Tarsus, holiness entered the rhythm of ordinary work. In Myra, generosity was tested by justice. Ani taught us that absence is not emptiness when memory is carried truthfully.

Thekla showed that vocation requires freedom, discernment, and courage without coercion. Finally, beneath Harran's open sky, hospitality became the discipline of remaining reachable without abandoning prudence.

Together, these places form no simple golden age.

Anatolia's Christian memory includes councils and monasteries, but also ruptures, expulsions, abandoned sanctuaries, silenced names, and communities that no longer stand where they once prayed.

Living memory cannot be built from nostalgia. Nor should suffering become a weapon against another people.

Memory becomes Christian when it serves truth, lament, repentance, reconciliation, and human dignity.

A theology of place must therefore remain humble. A landscape does not prove every story told about it. Tradition, archaeology, Scripture, and doctrine are not interchangeable. Each must be approached according to what it can truthfully offer.

Faith does not need exaggeration. The real history is already deep enough.

I began this journey not as a distant observer, but as a lay Catholic living in Istanbul. These places belong to the moral neighbourhood of daily life.

Their questions enter the classroom, the parish, the workplace, the family table, and the responsibilities of citizenship.

If the stones speak, they do not ask us merely to admire the past. They ask what kind of people we are becoming now.

Will unity remain a slogan, or become a discipline? Will doctrine protect the mystery of the person? Will memory deepen responsibility, or preserve resentment? Will beauty lead us towards wisdom? Will courage be shared? Will work serve dignity? Will charity confront injustice? Will the stranger find an open entrance?

These questions belong not only to Anatolia.

Every landscape carries memories beneath its ordinary surfaces: a closed church, a neighbourhood changed by migration, a wounded river, a forgotten name, or a table where someone was welcomed—or excluded.

To listen to place is to ask what has been handed to us, what has been hidden, and what responsibility now rests in our hands.

Catholicity does not flatten every place into the same story. It gathers many languages, rites, wounds, and gifts into communion centred on Christ.

No culture exhausts the Gospel, and no community remembers perfectly. We need one another's witness, correction, beauty, and prayer.

The Church becomes more fully herself when memory is purified by truth and difference is received without fear.

This season began beneath the waters of Nicaea and ends beneath the open sky of Anatolia.

The journey has not given us a final answer. It has taught us a way of listening.

To approach stones without possessing them. To honour memory without becoming captive to it. To speak truth without domination. To receive beauty without escaping responsibility. And to recognise that holy ground begins wherever another person's dignity is placed into our care.

The season ends here.

But the land has not finished speaking.

Editorial Note

When Stones Speak brings Catholic reflection into conversation with the Christian East, the religious and civic plurality of contemporary Türkiye, and the moral responsibilities of memory. The essays distinguish, wherever necessary, between documented history, archaeology, doctrine, devotional tradition, and literary memory. They do not treat a landscape as proof of every story associated with it.

Primary points of orientation include the New Testament; the doctrinal definitions associated with Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon; Saint Basil's homiletic witness to the Forty Martyrs; the Second Vatican Council's teaching on ecumenism and the lay vocation; and the historical traditions connected with the sites discussed. The series is written for reflection rather than as a substitute for specialist archaeological or historical scholarship.

SELECTED TEXTUAL ANCHORS

- Genesis 11–12 and 18; Acts 11, 18, 21, and 22; 1 Corinthians 12.
- The Creed of Nicaea (325) and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381).
- The Council of Ephesus (431) and the Definition of Chalcedon (451).
- Saint Basil the Great, homily on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste.
- Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*.
- The Acts of Paul and Thecla, read as an early Christian apocryphal work rather than canonical Scripture.

THE THRESHOLD JOURNAL

When Stones Speak

Written and narrated by Ersun Augustinus Kayra

Produced by The Threshold Journal

Complete Written Collection · 2026