

Tradition of Mary's house in Turkey stems from nun's vision

EPHESUS, Turkey (CNS) — Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims began making pilgrimages to the House of the Virgin Mary near Ephesus only after a bedridden, almost illiterate German nun had a vision of the house's location.

In an account attributed to Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, who never left Germany, the house could be found high on a rocky hill above Ephesus, partially hidden in a grove of trees.

Pope Benedict XVI briefly went into the tiny house Nov. 29 before celebrating an outdoor Mass in honor of Mary.

Blessed Emmerich's description of her vision was published in "The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary" by the poet Clemens Brentano after the nun's death in 1824.

While Brentano claimed to have acted as a secretary, simply writing down what Blessed Emmerich described, the Vatican said the style raised enough questions over authorship that it did not consider the book on Mary or two other Brentano accounts of Blessed Emmerich's visions in the process that led to her beatification in 2004.

However, the book led a French priest to Turkey in 1881 in a search for the house.

According to articles from the Vatican newspaper distributed to journalists traveling with the pope, Father Alexandre Govet "said he found the house, but he was not able to prove it."

Blessed Emmerich's vision was not the only clue that Mary may have lived in Turkey.

While it is generally accepted that St. John the Evangelist wrote the Book of Revelation on the island of Patmos, just off the coast of Ephesus, a strong and ancient tradition holds that he also lived in Ephesus and is buried there.

Since the Gospel says that, from the cross, Jesus entrusted his mother to John's care, many believe he would not have traveled without her.

However, the main Christian tradition has held that Mary ended her earthly life in Jerusalem. Catholics believe she was assumed body and soul into heaven; Orthodox describe her dormition, or falling asleep, in the city of Christ's death and resurrection before being taken into heaven.

Nevertheless, Orthodox believers near Ephesus have held for centuries that Mary spent the last nine years of her life there and that the dormition took place there.

Despite Father Govet's failure to find the house or traces of it, Lazzarist priests from the nearby city of Izmir set out in 1891 to try to find the place Blessed Emmerich described, or, in the case of one of the priests, to demonstrate that Blessed Emmerich was wrong.

The Lazzarists spent two hot summer days looking around Ephesus, finding nothing. When their water ran out, they asked some local women where they could find a well and were directed up the hill to the "monastery."

They found a spring next to the ruins of a little chapel half hidden by the trees in a scene almost exactly as Blessed Emmerich had described.

Subsequent excavations led to the conclusion that the chapel was built no earlier than the seventh century, but that part of it was erected on the foundation of a much older building, one constructed "with materials that the archaeologists said were similar to those used in the first centuries of our era," said an article from the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*.

The article, as well as one written by Archbishop Ruggero Francheschini of Izmir, also questions whether it was simply a coincidence that in 431 bishops from around the world met at the Council of Ephesus and proclaimed that Mary was the “Theotokos,” the Mother of God, affirming at the same time that Christ was fully human and fully divine.

Archbishop Francheschini wrote that the fact that Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims — who honor Mary and believe that Jesus was born of a virgin — all make pilgrimages to pray at the house is further testimony to her presence in some way.

“Mary is the mother of all and she welcomes all her children into her house — children of many different cultures and religions — and speaks to their hearts,” he wrote.

“Here differences disappear and only the most important thing remains: to be children and adorers of the one God,” the archbishop said.