

Pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain

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This article also appears on Professor Cutsinger's weblog, *Anamnēsis*, together with a number of photographs: http://www.cutsinger.net/wordpress2/?page_id=68.



For several years my son, Trevor, and I had discussed the possibility of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain of Athos, the world's only monastic republic, located on the easternmost peninsula of Halkidiki in northern Greece. Renowned for its natural beauty and the numberless treasures of its ancient Byzantine monasteries, this “Garden of the Theotokos” has been the spiritual center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity for over a thousand years, and for Orthodox men—women are not permitted—it is in many ways the equivalent of what Lhasa is (or rather was) for the Tibetan Buddhist and of what Mecca is for the Muslim.

In early June of 2007, the moment seemed right for this long-anticipated journey, and we set out for Greece, flying first to Thessaloniki, where we visited the Church of Saint Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), venerating the relics of this great defender of the Athonite monks and their practice of hesychasm, before taking a taxi to the small seaside village of Ouranoupolis, whence one departs for the Mountain on the daily ferryboat, traveling along the Singitic Gulf side of the peninsula. Disembarking at the port of Zographou and hiking the first day to the opposite side of the peninsula, we made our

way in a clockwise direction, traveling to the communities of Vatopedi, Stravronikita, Iveron, the Great Lavra, Prodromos, Agia Anna, and Simonopetra.

A number of students, friends, family members, academic colleagues, and fellow Orthodox Christians have asked about our pilgrimage, and it seemed the best response I could offer was to type up a few of the entries from my journal while the experience was still relatively fresh in my mind. The results—largely travelogue, but in part meditation—are here made available to the wider audience afforded by my website and weblog. I am the first to recognize how inadequate these words are to the realities concerned. It is my hope nonetheless that this brief and necessarily idiosyncratic account might be a source, if not of inspiration or instruction, then at least of enjoyment for a few of my readers.

Day One: Wednesday, 13 June — Ouranoupolis to Vatopedi

Up at 6:30 a.m. we arrived in the lobby of our hotel—the Zeus—for breakfast at 7:45, but were told by the manager we would be well advised to secure our *diamonitiria* (the special permits one must have for entrance to the Mountain) and tickets for the ferry as soon as possible, so we headed to the Pilgrims’ Office, just a five minute walk from the hotel. Having stopped there yesterday, we were prepared to show our passports and reservations, and to pay the 55-Euro charge.

We then walked back to the hotel and had just seated ourselves for breakfast when I heard a hearty voice across the lobby call, “So look who’s here!” It was Vincent Rossi, my former colleague at Rose Hill College, who had just arrived in town with a friend. They had come to interview someone associated with the village’s famous Byzantine tower. Vincent and I had exchanged a few emails in the spring, so he knew in general terms of our plan to come to Athos but did not know our dates. We visited with them for a half hour or so and then, having shouldered our backpacks, headed to the quay to board the ferry—along with the daily quota of roughly one hundred other men, together with an assortment of trucks and vans carrying supplies to the monasteries.

The ferry is named the *Axion Estin* after one of the Mountain’s most famous icons. *Axion estin* is Greek for “It is truly meet”, the opening words of an Orthodox hymn

to the Virgin: “It is truly meet to bless thee, O *Theotokos*, ever blessed, and most pure, and the Mother of our God. More honorable than the cherubim, and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim, without corruption Thou gavest birth to God the Word. Thou art truly *Theotokos*, and we magnify Thee.” The second, and older, part of the hymn, beginning with the words, “More honorable than the cherubim”, is attributed to Saint Cosmas the Hymnographer (eighth century). According to Athosite tradition, however, the words of the first sentence—commencing with the phrase *Axion estin*—were revealed by the Archangel Gabriel to a monk of the Mountain in the year 980.

One Saturday, it seems, a *geron* (spiritual elder) left his cell to attend the all-night vigil in Karyes, capital of the Holy Mountain, telling his disciple to chant the services alone. That evening an unknown monk came to the cell, and he and the disciple began the vigil together, but during the Ninth Ode of the Canon of the Matins service, when they began to sing the *Magnificat*, the visiting monk inserted the words “It is truly meet...” and then continued with “More honorable than the Cherubim....”; as he sang, the icon of the *Theotokos* began to radiate with Uncreated Light. When the disciple asked his mysterious visitor to write down the new words, he took a roof tile and wrote upon it with his finger as though the tile were made of wax. The disciple knew then this was no ordinary monk, but the Archangel Gabriel. The angel disappeared, but the icon—which now hangs in the Church of the Protaton in Karyes and is referred to as the *Axion Estin*—continued to radiate light for some time and has been the source of numerous miracles over the course of the centuries.

In any case this other, seaworthy *Axion Estin* left the dock promptly at the appointed time of 9:45 a.m. About a half hour later we rounded a bend in the undulating coastline and were treated to our first glimpse of Athos itself, at this point just a gray silhouette barely visible in the distance through the morning mist. It took about another half hour to reach the *arsanas* (port) of the Bulgarian Monastery of Zographou, where we had elected to disembark. (Most pilgrims continue further along the coast to the port village of Daphne.) We had carefully studied what we thought was a good topographical map—namely, *Wege am Athos* by the Austrian Reinhold Zwerger, recommended by the Friends of Mount Athos—and had come to the conclusion it would be a relatively easy

hike from there to Zographou itself and then on across the peninsula to Vatopedi, where we had arranged to stay our first night. I also inquired about this plan at the Pilgrims' Office, only to receive confirmation that this was indeed a reasonable itinerary. Well, hike we did, but not for the "three hours or so" we were told it would probably take us. In fact, owing in part to a short detour with a pilgrim from Germany who had lost his way, but also to our own frequent stops along the path to take in a sudden glimpse of the Mountain, to offer a prayer at a wayside shrine, to enjoy the many varieties of beautiful wildflowers, and to make certain of our bearings by cross-checking our map with the occasional sign, it took us nearly three to reach Zographou, and I believe it would have taken at least another two to get to Vatopedi—if, that is, we'd not ourselves gotten rather seriously lost!

It was approaching mid-afternoon when we found ourselves at the end of a tortuous, unusually rocky, and increasingly thorny path. The cobblestones simply disappeared in the middle of a hillside meadow, and our compass did us no good since we were no longer sure in which direction our destination lay. The only signs of civilization were two abandoned wooden platforms, each constructed atop four roughly hewn logs and positioned at a height of perhaps eight to ten feet from the ground. Could these be, we wondered, the surviving workmanship of some bygone Athonite stylites? We inquired about this more than once afterward, but none of the monks we asked had ever seen or heard of such thing. In any case it was beginning to look as though we might have to spend our first night in the wilderness—and without the benefit of our own *styloi* (pillars)! All we knew to do was entreat the Mother of God for Her help and start retracing our steps to the main road.

As Heaven would have it, our coming to that road coincided exactly with our meeting a man coming down a small side path from the opposite direction, and next to this path, as we could see very clearly now, was a sign marked (in Greek) "To Vatopedi"—a sign either both of us had missed or that had not been there before.... Be that as it may, there is little doubt we would once again have failed to take the proper turn were it not for the striding figure who had suddenly caught our attention at just the right instant, but who had now, just as suddenly, disappeared into the forest. The strange thing

was that this fellow had no backpack (unlike most of the pilgrims we met), and he was clearly not a monk; and rather than sturdy hiking shoes he was wearing sandals. Indeed his overall appearance was that of someone going out for a rather casual stroll, which led us to conclude that the monastery must be just a few minutes away. So imagine our surprise as we trudged on and on and on, only to discover that Vatopedi was still another two hours away—over difficult ground, including a rocky descent of about one thousand feet to the northern coast, to match of course the thousand feet we had ascended at the start of the day. So: man or angel? Either way he had evidently performed an angelic function! It is indeed “truly meet to bless Thee, O *Theotokos*”.

We finally arrived at Vatopedi about 5:45 p.m., almost exactly seven hours after setting out in the morning. We were drenched with perspiration, exhausted, and extremely thirsty, having consumed the last of our water (thinking we were nearly finished with our hike) about an hour and half earlier. A monk in the gatehouse took our *diamonitiria* and told us that Vespers was in progress and that we would need to wait until it was over to see the guest master. Fortunately, as we were stumbling about the courtyard trying to find the *catholikon* (central church of a monastery), the guest master appeared, introducing us in turn to an American monk, Father Matteus, who knew me from his visit to Rose Hill in 1996. The monks and guests were soon called into the *trapeza* (refectory) for supper—and some welcome water!—after which we were invited to go to the *catholikon* to hear a short talk about Vatopedi’s history and architecture and venerate several miracle-working icons and the holy relics. These included a piece of the true Cross and the skulls of Saints Gregory the Theologian (329-89) and John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), the latter with its left ear completely incorrupt and visible behind a small piece of glass inside a little lid on the silver reliquary. Father Matteus explained that this was the ear, according to tradition, into which Saint Paul had been seen to whisper while Saint John was writing his homilies on Romans. Vatopedi also possesses the *zone* (sash) of the *Theotokos*, which is known for effecting many cures, especially for women who are experiencing difficult or dangerous pregnancies, but also for people with cancer. Small pieces of cloth that have been touched to the sash and that

are reputed to have the same thaumaturgical benefits are available to pilgrims who request them, and we did this before our departure the following morning.

I think of Philip Sherrard's description of pilgrimage when I reflect on this, our first day on the Mountain: "A pilgrimage is not simply a matter of getting to a particular shrine or holy place. It is a deliberate sundering and surrender of one's habitual conditions of comfort, routine, safety, convenience. Unlike the tourist, whose aim is to see things and to travel around in conditions which are as comfortable, secure, familiar, convenient, and unchallenging as possible, the pilgrim breaks with his material servitude, puts his trust in God, and sets out on a quest which is inward as much as outward. In this sense he becomes the image of the spiritual seeker. He removes himself as far as possible from the artificiality within which he is enclosed by his life in society. Of this spiritual exploration, inward and outward, walking is an essential part. His feet tread the earth—the earth from which he is made and from which he is usually so cut off. Through his eyes, ears, nose, he renews his sense of natural beauty. He watches the flight of bird or insect, the ripple of light on leaves, the timeless vistas of the sea; he listens to the song of water, the call of God's creatures; he breathes in the scent of tree and flower and soil. His feet tire, his body aches, sweat drips from his head and trickles into his eyes and down his neck. He tastes rigor and hardship. But through all this—and only through all this, and through his prayer and dedication and confidence—slowly an inner change is wrought, a new rhythm grows, a deeper harmony. The pilgrimage is at work" ("The Paths of Athos", *Eastern Churches Review*, Vol. 9:1-2 [1977], p. 102).

Day Two: Thursday, 14 June — Vatopedi to Stavronikita

A less eventful—and blessedly less rigorous!—day began with our attending Orthros in the *catholikon* followed by the Divine Liturgy in the oldest of the monastery's chapels. I neglected to mention in my entry for Wednesday that Vatopedi is the largest community on the Mountain; there are currently about one hundred monks, and the brotherhood's numerous buildings include thirty-four separate chapels. Owing to the large number of pilgrims and the relatively small size of the *catholikon*, the Liturgy is normally served simultaneously in a number of different locations. The chanters during Orthros were excellent, and I was particularly struck by something I had never seen before: in addition to the two lead chanters, who sang antiphonally from each side of the nave, there was a third monk who strode quite rapidly back and forth between them, the wide sleeves of his cassock billowing in the breeze he created. He would arrive just in time at each *kliros*

(chanter's stand) to intone a given verse of the Psalms while the chanter on that side was singing the appropriate *sticheron* (special hymn)—or at least I think this is what might have been happening! There was much to attend to on many levels.

After breakfast we decided to begin making our way toward the monastery of Stavronikita even though we had been granted the abbot's blessing to stay a second night at Vatopedi. Several friends who have been to the Mountain had recommended to me that we try to spend at least two days in at least one of the monasteries in order to get a sense of the daily rhythm of monastic life. This would doubtless have been a most rewarding experience, but we were eager to see as many different communities as possible, and Trevor was especially keen on exploring as much of the natural environment as we could. Perhaps on a future visit I shall attempt to stay put for a longer time in one place. Before leaving we stopped by the monastery's bookstore and there secured what has proven to be a much better map (the Road Editions of "Mount Athos") along with a little booklet on "The Paths of *Agion Oros*" (published by Lectus). I would strongly recommend both of these to prospective hikers over the Zwerger map.

Most pilgrims spend only four days (and three nights) on Mount Athos, but we had decided early in our planning that we would try to stay a full week. Since the *diamonitiria* the Pilgrims' Office had issued us were only for the usual, shorter period, we had been advised that we would need to request an extension of these permits after our arrival on the Mountain. Extensions are granted at the headquarters of the Holy Epistasia in the capital, Karyes, so to Karyes we decided to go. This proved a fruitless detour, however, since the monk in charge of the approval process was away from his office and was not expected back until afternoon. Therefore, having first purchased some fruit in one of the little shops in the village, we headed down the road toward Stavronikita. This was quite an easy walk of only an hour and half, though it was along one of the Mountain's rather dusty and not very agreeable forest roads, many of which have been only recently cut—partly in the interest (we were told by one monk) of bringing in water more rapidly in the event of forest fires, though also in order to deal with the increasing numbers of visitors.

Stavronikita we have found to be a perfectly exquisite little gem. I am writing these words very comfortably seated on a little couch on a balcony overlooking the deep blues and greens of the Aegean with the (quite uncharacteristically) unclouded peak of Athos rising directly in front of me, framed against the bright afternoon sky. Reaching the monastery about 1:15 p.m., we have spent a quiet and relaxing afternoon and early evening exploring the grounds—including the eighteenth-century Chapel of Saint Demetrius of Thessaloniki (fourth century) at the edge of the cemetery; relaxing in our room and taking short naps; listening to the sounds of the waves on the rocks about a hundred feet beneath our guestroom windows; sitting along the water's edge and reading; attending Vespers; enjoying a delicious supper of pasta, tomatoes, onions, bread, and apricots; and visiting with the guest master, Father Palamas, who gave us little icon cards of Saint Nicholas (also fourth century), the patron of the *catholikon*, as well as some holy oil. After Compline we had the opportunity to venerate the monastery's relics, which include those of The Three Holy Siblings (my epithet, not the tradition's!): Saint Basil the Great (c. 330-79), Saint Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-c. 395), and Saint Macrina the Younger (324-79).

I have very much enjoyed our stay in this little community and shall make a point of coming here again if and when I am able to return to Athos. It is the smallest of the monasteries, both in terms of physical size and number of monks (just twenty or so at this time), and for this reason attracts fewer pilgrims, which means in turn of course that it affords the physical traveler who aspires to be a spiritual traveler a very quiet setting—a superb place for making a retreat of several days.

A younger monk, and relative newcomer to the Mountain, told us of being invited to go on a walk with an eighty-five-year-old elder and his disciple, and of the old man scampering along the path as if he were a mountain goat! It is customary in Eastern Christian spiritual practice for a disciple to externalize, and thus objectify, his thoughts—both good and bad—by telling them all to his spiritual master. At one point the disciple said, “Father, I have just had a thought, and would like your blessing to express it.” And of course the blessing was given. “My thought was ... to push you off the cliff!” The elder just laughed and said it was of the devil, who knew that in killing his spiritual master the disciple would only hurt

himself. The story was told to illustrate the great freedom and love involved in radical openness.

Day Three: Friday, 15 June — Stavronikita to Iveron

We rose this morning at 5:00 a.m. to catch the end of Orthros and then the Liturgy. Since “breakfast” would not be served until mid-day, Father Palamas, knowing we needed to leave fairly early, kindly offered us some bread, homemade apricot jelly, and water, as we sat under the grape arbor just outside the guesthouse. Another, older monk also gave Trevor a small cross he had fashioned from the seeds of olives. We had arranged the night before to share a “taxi” with four Greek pilgrims, rather than walking back up the same dusty road we came down yesterday. The taxis are eight-to-ten-person vans, some driven by monks, though in this case the driver was a layman.

Arriving in Karyes around 9:00 a.m., we elected first to walk up the hill on the northeast side of the village to the Skete of Saint Andreas, a dependency of Vatopedi that boasts the largest *catholikon* on the Mountain—owing in large part to the patronage of two Russian czars. The skete was virtually abandoned at the time of the Russian Revolution, however, and the monks’ quarters and other outbuildings are now very dilapidated. As elsewhere on the Mountain, extensive restoration work is in progress—we saw a large bell that had been brought down from the tower for cleaning—and lay workers were all about, together I fear with considerable litter, which we have noticed at a number of construction sites. We were able to take a very brief (and unauthorized!) peek inside at the huge, gilded *iconostasis* (icon screen) before being scolded by one of the workers.

Back down to the village we went again to the Office of the Holy Epistasia and were this time able to secure the needed extension on our permits. That task accomplished, Trevor agreed to guard our backpacks for a few minutes while I browsed in a couple of shops, looking at icons and such. When I returned I found him engrossed in conversation with a monk, who turned out to be someone mentioned to us just the day before yesterday by Vincent Rossi and his traveling companion. I had expressed my bemusement at the fact that many of these ancient monasteries now have fax machines,

and Vincent's friend had replied, "Fax machines? That's nothing. I correspond with a monk in one of the sketes who uploads things to the Internet on his solar-powered laptop!" Well, as Providence would have it, out of the two or three thousand other Athonite possibilities, this turned out to be the very same computer-savvy father. Trevor had apparently not yet mentioned our surname, so when I introduced myself, the monk's eyes grew wide and then immediately narrowed: "So you're James Cutsinger! You're that crazy, mixed-up Sufi!" Somewhat taken aback, I nonetheless had the presence of mind to reply, "On what authority do you say that?" To which he replied, "By my *own* authority!" "On what grounds?" I then asked. At this point, he faked a flurry of punches to my jaw, and simply said, "GRRR!" I confess it is still not clear to me, even after a few more minutes of rather tense conversation, what he might have read of mine or heard about me, but I suspect he must have seen my contribution to the *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and Christian East* conference and book: "*Hesychia: An Orthodox Opening to Esoteric Ecumenism*". I had fully intended to keep my perennialism to myself on the Mountain, not realizing I would be dealing with such widely read, or highly "wired", monks!

At this point we bought some apples, peaches, and nuts in one of the shops and, having fortified ourselves for more hiking, headed out of town, passing through the grounds of Koutloumousiou Monastery on the outskirts of Karyes, and then along a very beautiful—and thankfully well-marked—cobble-stone path, which wound through a wooded glen or two, past a tiny wayside chapel, and then across an old stone bridge, extending over a small waterfall and rapids. We arrived at our next destination, the Monastery of Iveron, about 2:00 p.m. and were welcomed by the guest master, Father Jeremiah. He had no record of the reservation I had made by telephone some months ago, but having looked over a copy of the letter and fax I had also sent to the monastery, and having learned of my friendship with Father John Chryssavgis—like him a Greek Australian, who had recommended we visit Iveron—he was ready enough to offer us some very satisfying accommodations. The afternoon was spent reading, taking a few photographs of the environs—including the curious figure of what appeared to be a black woman on the *catholikon* cupola—and doing some laundry. We then attended Vespers at

6:00 p.m. in the *catholikon*. One of the cantors was by far the best we have heard yet: he seemed to have a kind of river of Byzantine sound running through him, and when he opened his mouth it flowed forth as if with no effort. Vespers was immediately followed by a short akathist service in a chapel near the gate, where we were able to venerate the monastery's best-known icon, the wonder-working *Panagia Portaitissa*, or "All-Holy Keeper of the Gate".

Tradition has it that this sacred image of the *Theotokos* and Christ, painted by Saint Luke and miraculously preserved through the centuries, found its way into the possession of a poor widow in Nicaea during the time of the iconoclastic controversy. At the Virgin's instruction, the widow placed the icon into the sea to preserve it from destruction, and to her amazement it did not sink but floated away upright on the waves. Many years later it came to the Holy Mountain, arriving near the Monastery of Iveron, once again floating on the waves—"in a pillar of fire", as the Athonite narrative recounts. The Mother of God appeared in a vision to a holy monk of the monastery named Gabriel, telling him She wished for his brotherhood to have Her icon for their help and salvation; by his faith in Her power he was able "to walk on the waters as though on dry land", bringing it to shore and placing it in the altar of the *catholikon*. The next morning, however, the monks found the icon was missing, having been moved—or having moved itself—to a position near the gate of the monastery. It was returned to the altar, but the next day was found again at the gate. This scenario was repeated a third time, at which point the *Theotokos* spoke from the icon, informing the monks, "It is not for you to guard Me, but for Me to guard you!" Hence the name *Portaitissa*, and hence its present position in its own special chapel by the gate.

A monk reflected on his family: parents who are now in their eighties, an older sister, a younger brother. His mother had given him her blessing to come to Mount Athos, but was very sad at his decision to do so, until she saw pictures of his tonsuring. Then she said it all began to make perfect sense to her. He spoke of the paradox of feeling closer to certain people in the world, including the members of his family, now that he was separated from them physically, while others—whom he had formerly thought were important—had nearly dissolved in his memory.

Day Four: Saturday, 16 June — Iveron to the Great Lavra

Having been warned against trying to hike the exceptionally tortuous and poorly marked footpath from Iveron to our next destination, the Holy Monastery of the Great Lavra, and not wishing to follow the only alternative land route—one of the newly bulldozed, and very dusty, forest roads, which would have taken us five hours or so—we elected to travel by water. One of the monks in the bookstore was kind enough to telephone the captain of a little boat (named “Saint Athanasios the Athonite”) that trolls up and down the coast of the peninsula shuttling pilgrims between the monasteries, and arrangements were made for us to be picked up at Iveron’s *arsanas* at 10:00 a.m. We had managed to find a couple of rather scrawny apples and a handful of raisins in the guest house and made a breakfast of these as we waited for the boat, which appeared about 10:20. It was a very quick trip of about thirty minutes down the coast to the port of the Lavra and then a climb of maybe three or four hundred feet up to the monastery itself. Drenched with perspiration—as is becoming our custom!—we signed ourselves in at the guesthouse and were assigned what proved to be our poorest accommodations on the Mountain, which we shared with two Venetian pilgrims: a tiny room with even tinier windows would make the night a very hot one—though the windows, we later discovered, were plenty large enough to accommodate the entry of several dozen mosquitoes!

The afternoon was spent with the usual explorations and a short rest, lying on the hillside just outside the east wall overlooking the sea. The Great Lavra, which stands near the southeastern tip of the peninsula, is the oldest of the monasteries, having been founded in 963 by Saint Athanasios the Athonite (c. 920-c. 1000), and it therefore ranks first in hierarchical order among the twenty “ruling monasteries” of the Mountain. Like most of the others, it is laid out in the form of a small medieval town, surrounded on all sides by high walls, punctuated in this case by fifteen towers. It is also like several others in that it is undergoing extensive repair. I confess there is something rather disconcerting about the site of a brightly painted red tower crane rising high above a tenth century Byzantine fortress! Of special interest were a number of icons in the porch of the *catholikon* featuring scenes from the Last Judgment: brightly colored and gilded saints enjoying the glories of Heaven were set in contrast to gigantic whales with huge teeth

consuming torrential downhill flows of naked sinners; or again—to make it clear to the fathers that they themselves are by no means exempt from this final assize!—a ladder crowded with monks, some successfully (if painstakingly) climbing to the top with the help of attending angels, while others were being clawed at and pulled from the ladder by demons.

Vespers was at 6:00 p.m. with two excellent chanters (one at each *kliros*), and as at Vatopedi there was a third monk shuttling back and forth to intone the verses. I was particularly struck by the periodic lowering, lighting, and raising of small candelabra; one on each side of the church, they were attached to ropes and raised and lowered by means of pulleys. After a light supper of boiled potatoes, salad, and bread we returned to the *catholikon* to venerate the relics, including those of Saint Basil the Great, Stephen the Protomartyr, Saint Anne, Saint Andreas (the Apostle Andrew), and of course Saint Athanasios, the founder of the monastery, who is entombed in the narthex.

We were relaxing in the courtyard afterward when one of the monks, Father Efstathios, came by and volunteered to take us on a short tour of the Great Lavra environs beyond the west wall. He showed us the monastery's water-driven olive press (no longer in use), and then took us to the charnel house where we were able to look through a small slatted gate and see a few of the twenty-five thousand skeletons—or rather parts thereof—that are housed there, among them those of thirty-five ecumenical patriarchs. Next he took us further up the hill, passing the small cave of a hermit just a few feet from the trail. “The heart should be a cave,” Father Efstathios quietly commented, “even if you live in the world.”

We came at last to an area strewn with a number of ancient boulders, the remnants of a pre-Christian shrine. The monk explained that there had been a pagan settlement on this site, though all the inhabitants were long since gone by the time the first Christians arrived on the Mountain in the third or fourth century. One of the boulders had been carved on one side so as to serve as a sundial; another had the faint etching of a face, presumably that of a deity. Nearby was a tiny rock chapel, built by Saint Athanasios, who had been told by the *Theotokos* he must erect a church and then celebrate a liturgy in it,

all within the space of a single day, in order to drive away the pagan gods who lived there, thus making the place safe for a monastery. Hence the tiny size of the chapel!

A few of the many monkish incongruities we have noticed as we travel the Mountain: a monk driving a backhoe, a monk operating a forklift, and—most curious of all!—a monk at the helm of a speedboat. Or are these incongruities? It has been difficult to understand how, or why, the fathers have begun to allow so much of the “world” to intrude into their life here. While readily acknowledging the problems this poses, one monk with whom we discussed the question observed that historically the technological “level” of Athos has been more or less “up to” that of the outside world, the only real exception being during the period of decline from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, when the Mountain became, unintentionally, more of a Byzantine museum than a living community. With the incursion of electricity, telephones, fax machines, roads, taxis, tower cranes, and so forth, the more typical pattern of the past is reasserting itself. Of course the principal question remains of where one draws the line.

Day Five: Sunday, 17 June — Great Lavra to Prodromos

The *simantron* (a wooden board, or sometimes metal bar, that is rhythmically struck with a mallet) began to sound in the courtyard around 3:15 or 3:30 a.m., followed soon afterward—this being a Sunday—by the monastery’s bells, which were rung by our new friend Father Efstathios. We attended all the services this morning—about six and a half hours altogether—including a blessing of the waters in the *phiale* (the largest on Athos), which is situated just outside the *catholikon* beneath a thousand-year-old cypress tree said to have been planted by Saint Athanasios himself. With only some fruit and nuts, a few small potatoes and salad, and a little bread the day before, I was more than ready when we were called to the *trapeza* around 9:45. Following a “brunch” of beans cooked in tomato sauce, bread, water, wine, and a little chocolate cracker something, we packed our things and headed down the path to our next destination, the Romanian Skete of Prodromos (that is, “the Forerunner”, which is the epithet in the Orthodox East for Saint John the Baptist). Arriving about 1:00 p.m., we checked in with the guest master by pantomime, he knowing no English and we no Romanian, and then, having dropped our backpacks off in our room, we continued our hike a half hour or so further along the road, following the signs to Saint Athanasios’s Cave, which is reached by descending a steep

cliff leading down toward the sea. We found a quiet, shaded spot near the cave and spent some time reading, praying, drinking in the spectacular view, and writing in our journals.

Back at the skete, Vespers was from 4:00 to 5:30. A word or two should be interpolated at some point—and this is as good a place as any—concerning the carved wooden choir stalls that are positioned along the walls and around the pillars in the several churches we have visited, and sitting or standing in which we have spent a great deal of our time. With a seat that folds down for “full sitting” or up for “half sitting” or leaning, I find them to be very cleverly constructed affairs. For it is thus left up to the occupant whether to stand all the time, if his aim is to be as ascetical as possible, or only at key points in the services. During the two (or more) hours of services that take place every morning in a darkness illumined by only a few oil lamps and candles—well before the sun has even begun to think about peeking through the windows!—the stalls become handy places to doze. When “half sitting” you can rest yourself on the arms of the stall, nodding your head down to your chest, or when “full sitting” you can lean yourself back or to one side for a more thorough and satisfying slumber! Trevor was somewhat chagrined one morning to discover he had more or less slept through all of Orthros, but he felt better when I told him I had seen more than one monk do the same. Perhaps I should add, since this is now a public document, that I mean no disrespect whatsoever by this observation; on the contrary, it is one more positive sign of Orthodoxy’s utter realism—of its recognition that a man is entitled to his finitude even on his way toward *theosis*, its characteristic sense that all of life, even sleep, is somehow caught up in the dance of prayer. I think of the Zen master Bankei, who objected to the use of the *keisaku* stick in the meditation hall on the grounds that “even a sleeping man is still a Buddha”!

This was my first in-person experience with Romanian chant, a very beautiful combination of Byzantine melodies with some simple polyphony. The thirty or so monks made many more *proskyneses* (full prostrations) during the course of the service than their Greek counterparts do, not only when venerating the icons but also, more rapidly and rhythmically, when repeating *Doamne, miluiește*, Romanian for “Lord, have mercy”. After Vespers it was supper in the *trapeza* as usual, followed—again as is usually the

case on the Mountain—by a short service back in the *catholikon* during which the relics were venerated, including those of Saint Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200).

Afterward we talked with Father Gabriel, a young monk in his mid-twenties, who visited the United States a few years ago on an exchange program in Maryland and who seems the only English speaker in the community. He informed us that services would begin in the morning at 3:00 a.m., but since we are planning a rather lengthy hike tomorrow we will probably just go to the liturgy, which starts around 5:30. We spent the rest of the evening strolling around the courtyard and sitting on a bench, enjoying the beautifully tended gardens and watching the aerial acrobatics of some birds (we had also seen them at the Lavra) who build little nests of mud under the eaves. Trevor said they were his new favorites. I am very glad to have stopped here and would strongly recommend that other pilgrims include this community in their itineraries.

Much could be written about the light, or rather lights, of the Holy Mountain: the soft oranges and pinks of the cliffs during the liminal minutes at each end of the day; the twinkling, dancing play of candle flames and oil lampada reflected in the icons; the shimmering reflections of stars on the sea; the otherworldly blending of gold and silver—the two Trees of Valinor!—when the sun has not yet quite retired for the night and the moon has just begun her journey across the sky; the radiant faces of the monks in church as morning first begins to creep through the windows after hours of service in darkness and one begins to realize that the black-robed swirls of movement have been people all along!

Day Six: Monday, 18 June — Prodomos to Agia Anna (Saint Anne) — The “Desert”

Up at 5:00 a.m., we entered the porch of the *catholikon* at about 5:15 in almost total darkness. Stepping unexpectedly backward to make way for the priest, who was just coming out to cense the icons, I nearly crushed a poor monk who was prostrate to the left of the door—and I doubtless would have done so had Trevor not pushed me back just in the nick of time! After a breakfast of fresh fruit and delicious bread—several slices of which, together with a few apricots and some halva, Father Gabriel had kindly packed for our lunch—we said goodbye to the Forerunner about 7:30. The first half hour or so was spent retracing our steps back up the road to the main path we had taken yesterday coming over from the Great Lavra. Here we filled our water bottles at a small spring—

where we were briefly joined by a canine traveling companion—and then began our trek in the direction of the Skete of Agia Anna.

This was the hike we had perhaps looked forward to more than any other, as it would be our one and only opportunity to experience just a bit of the “Desert”, the name the monks give the most remote part of their peninsula, an area of wildly varied topography located to the south and east of the peak of Mount Athos itself. Here is where many of the greatest ascetics have lived during the course of the centuries, whether with a few other monks in the numerous *kellia* (cells), *kalyvae* (huts), and *kathismata* (settlements) that dot the area or as true solitaries in isolated *hesychasteria* (hermitages), these last taking the form of rather ramshackle cabins or small caves in the cliffs. This would also be our chance to dive deeper into the Mountain’s exquisite natural environment.

For the first two hours the trail was almost entirely uphill and rather difficult going. Like many of the Athonite paths, it had at some point been painstakingly cobbled by monks who must have been thinking (or so it seemed to us) more about the hooves of their mules, and perhaps the erosion these obliging pack animals might cause on the slopes, than their own two human feet! Fortunately the path soon leveled off and turned to mostly dirt and small gravel, a much easier walking surface—at least for us bipeds!—than the broken and often jagged stones had been. Rising like a wall on our right were the lower reaches of the Mountain, and to our left was a lovely meadow, brightened by hundreds of exquisite wildflowers, cascading down the hill toward the sea. Though we were unable to see them, we heard the cries of wild jackals in the distance several times, coming it seemed from somewhere just below the treeline.

Another half hour or so further on, and we passed rather suddenly into a very dense forest. It was as if someone had abruptly turned the lights out—and turned down the thermostat by a dozen degrees! The canopy afforded by the (mainly) chestnut, oak, and fir trees was thick enough to block the sun almost entirely. The profusion of colors we had been enjoying in the meadow gave way at once to the deep earthen greens of moss and lichen, and the browns of a mostly sandy soil were replaced by the blacks of a loam

that had been enriched by centuries of falling leaves. I do not recall ever feeling so much as if I were in a cave while still outdoors! We found the perfect spot to pause for our lunch just below an old stone bridge on a bank of tangled roots overlooking a small mountain stream. To one side of the bridge we noticed two weathered icons of the Mother of God tacked to a tree, a superb spot for a mid-day session of invocation, while on the opposite side was a tangled, rocky path, like so many we had come across today, leading off from the main trail we had been following. Its entrance was marked by one of the most memorable things we have seen: a small rock bearing the roughly etched image of the *Theotokos* and an unidentified saint. Could this be the portal, I wondered—through this labyrinth of trees and bushes—to the hidden fastness of some holy Hesychast? It would no doubt have been a great blessing to encounter such an elder, someone whose very being had become his teaching, and it was tempting to forsake the mid-day hour of prayer to see what we might find. But this would have been a temptation precisely, I realized. For all the traditions teach us not to neglect the way we are given, wandering (Greek: *planē*) away in search of experiences, graces, sensible consolations.

Rested and nourished, we continued on our way, coming in another two hours to the “Cross”, a place where one can turn either right to ascend to the Panagia Chapel (at an elevation of around 5,000 feet) and then on up to the peak of Athos (6,700 feet) or to the left to descend toward Karoulia—a name meaning “pulleys” in Greek after the only method by which the hermits of old were able to get down the cliffs to their *hesychasteria* or have food and supplies lowered to them. We were told that the monks who continue to live in these settlements have reduced their bodily needs to an absolute minimum, drinking only rainwater, which they collect in the hollows of the rocks outside their huts, eating just enough to stay alive, and supporting themselves by weaving baskets and making *komvoskinia* (prayer ropes), which they exchange for food in the port village of Daphne. Just a few minutes more, and we came to a small clearing where we could catch our first glimpse of the Skete of Agia Anna, over 2,000 feet below the level of the trail we had been following, as well as the Monastery of Simonopetra, which will be our next and last stop, perched atop its distinctive rock tower further along the coast. Here we began our descent along a very precipitous, very rocky trail, where every step had to be

taken with the utmost care to avoid slipping or stumbling—which, thankfully, I managed to do only once! It was quite a demanding hour or so, punctuated by three or four stops to rest and drink in some of the breathtaking scenery. I must say I had never before become so weary walking downhill.

We arrived at the skete about 3:00 p.m. and were soon joined outside the *archontariki* (guesthouse) by seven other pilgrims arriving from various directions, mostly coming up the hill from the *arsanas*. While waiting for the guest master to make his appearance, we struck up a conversation with one of these travelers, who turned out to be the national director of the professional football (soccer) association for Greece—basically the equivalent, I suppose, of the Commissioner of the NFL, though I rather doubt the latter makes a pilgrimage every year to the Mountain, as this man does!

There was no Vespers this evening in the *kyriakon* (central church of a skete). In the sketes, unlike the monasteries, it is the custom for the monks to read the daily services in their separate cells, coming together for the Divine Liturgy only on Sundays and feasts. But one of the fathers was kind enough to show us inside the church and let us venerate the relics and icons, including a thaumaturgical icon of the community's patroness, Saint Anne—the mother of the Mother of God—who is especially known for favoring the supplications of women who have had trouble conceiving or bearing children; numerous photographs of babies had been left beneath the icon in thanksgiving for answered prayers. Among the relics were the skull of Saint Makarios the Great (c. 300-391) and the right foot (with skin and veins still attached) of Saint Anne. There soon followed a delicious supper of lentil soup, cucumbers, bread, and apples. We have been sitting in the courtyard just outside the church, enjoying the braying of the mules—though not the accompanying flies!—and writing in our journals, as the sun sets over the Aegean and another memorable day concludes.

It is the middle of the Apostles' Fast on the Mountain (Old Calendar), which accounts in part for the simplicity of the meals we have been given. Of course, this is nothing compared to Great Lent, which entails the strictest discipline of the year. We were told that the first three days of Lent—Clean Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday—are the most rigorous of all. Many of the fathers will eat and drink nothing, even water, during

this period, and one of them described how drawn their faces can get as their bodies begin to dehydrate. Beginning with the Presanctified Liturgy on Wednesday night, it is common for the monks to say, “The fast is over!” For then a meal, however simple, is eaten each day.

Day Seven: Tuesday, 19 June — Agia Anna to Simonopetra

Breakfast this morning was exceptionally spare, just a little bread and water, which we supplemented with some dried fruit and a few nuts from our backpacks. Actually there were also a few pieces of Turkish delight, apparently left over from yesterday’s hospitality for arriving pilgrims; this ubiquitous Athonite sweet, which is traditionally served to newcomers along with little cups of water, coffee, and ouzo, is in my opinion rather like lemon- or cherry-flavored Elmer’s glue even when it is fresh, so I decided to pass!

We stopped briefly to visit a tiny grotto—just below the guesthouse—that had belonged to Saint Gerasimos (1506-79) before making our way down the several hundred steps to the *arsanas*. As we were waiting for the ferry that would take us further along the coast to Simonopetra, a large supply boat docked. A truck piled high with bales of hay was the first to come off, followed by a number of palettes heavily laden with pieces of slate for some of the construction work going on back up the hill at the skete. These two quite disparate sorts of cargo turned out to be closely linked, as lay workers and a few monks began placing the slate in baskets tied to the backs of some rather sad looking mules, who had already set to work munching the hay, gathering strength and steeling their courage for the difficult climb ahead. A few pilgrims—perhaps better called “tourists”—who had also emerged from the boat had decided to take advantage of these transportation arrangements as well and were climbing aboard little wooden platforms strapped to the backs of the mules, their rather considerable luggage slung to each side. Although Athos has been referred to as a “Christian Tibet”, compassion toward “all sentient beings” did not seem the rule this morning!

A quick (twenty-minute) passage on the ferry, which afforded some spectacular scenery, including close-up views of a *hesychasterion* perched just above the water as well as the monasteries of Dionysiou and Gregoriou, brought us to the port of

Simonopetra, where we began a somewhat longer (thirty-minute) heart-racing climb up the zig-zagging, cobbled path to the monastery itself, which sits—rather precariously—at the top of a huge pinnacle of barren rock rising about a thousand feet above sea level. Speaking of Tibet, I must say that both the construction and the position of this latest of our Byzantine fortresses seem uncannily like that of the Potala in Lhasa, traditional home of the Dalai Lama. Perhaps a case could be made for an “immanent unity” of sacred architecture! The guest master, clearly experienced in these matters, quickly deduced from our soaking wet shirts that we had not been driven from the port at Daphne, which seems the most common mode of journeying for the other travelers who come here, and he very kindly asked whether we would like something to eat—besides the Turkish delight, of course!—to which Trevor replied, “Yes, please!” So after being shown to a spacious room with a beautiful view of Athos, we were treated to an unexpected lunch of roasted potatoes, eggplant, bread, and fruit, and then we both luxuriated in our first showers in five days.

I had just lain down for a short nap when one of the monks, Father Maximos, knocked on our door, and I am now writing these words having just arrived back from a delightful hour or so exploring the monastery with him in the lead. His name was mentioned to me before we came to the Mountain, and I had been hoping to have a chance to meet him. A former professor (Dr Nicholas Conostas) at Harvard, he has been here at Simonopetra for two years and was tonsured a monk just two months ago. He is now the librarian and took us on a tour of the forty-some-thousand-volume, multileveled facility—complete with computerized catalogue and moveable shelving in the stacks to save on space—all deftly wrapped around the mountain in the lowest reaches of the monastery’s foundation. Much of the monastery was destroyed by a terrible fire in 1891, including the library, but a few volumes were rescued and others have since been acquired from other monasteries, including a 1782 edition of the *Philokalia*, which he allowed us to hold. As we descended several flights of stairs, Father Maximos explained that the monastery is smaller than it appears in photographs (there are only about half the monks of Vatopedi) since the core is actually the mountain itself, and we could see this

clearly as we looked into several side rooms, in each of which the inner wall was indeed solid rock.

We also visited the kitchen and *trapeza*, both of which are in the process of being renovated. Many beautiful, newly painted icons adorn the walls of the *trapeza*, one entire mural telling the story of the founding of the monastery by Saint Simon. We then headed outside, walking along one of the eyrie-like balconies—where we could look down (!) on birds in flight—and then visiting the cemetery. As with other Athonite cemeteries, there are just a few graves (perhaps five or six) since the bodies of the monks are periodically exhumed to make way for the newly departed. Father Maximos explained that the graves are dug only about three feet deep. The monk's body is laid right on the earth without a casket, fully dressed in monastic habit, and is then covered with pieces of slate before being buried (this apparently helps to keep the bones in place for ease of exhumation). The length of time the bodies remain in the ground varies somewhat, but it is usually three or four years, and of course by then the flesh has mostly melted away. The garments are still intact, however—"Polyester socks last forever!" Father Maximos quipped—and he admitted it could be rather eerie to confront the skeleton of an old friend still garbed in full monastic habit. An excellent *memento mori*! The skull and other major bones are then arranged in the charnel house with their counterparts from other skeletons, and the smaller bones are all placed in a common, metal-lidded ossuary in the adjacent garden. Some of the fathers say the color of the bones is significant, an amber color being often deemed a mark of sanctity, while white "isn't good"; in the final analysis, though—Father Maximos was quick to add—"bones are bones".

In each of the monasteries there are elderly monks who came to Athos in their teens, straight from small country villages, never having been on a date, never having seen a movie, without ever going to college—and perhaps without finishing high school. A younger, highly educated father described them to us, with evident affection and admiration, as incredibly childlike, though by no means impractical, people.

Day Eight: Wednesday, 20 June — Simonopetra to Ouranoupolis

I left off writing yesterday in the mid-afternoon before the *simantron* sounded for Vespers, when we had our first chance to hear the beautiful chanting of the much-recorded monks of this monastery. I am told that Simonopetra is the only community on the Mountain to employ full double choirs at every service, though perhaps Vatopedi is not far behind. In any case it was quite a change from the soloist cantors we had experienced thus far on our pilgrimage, and it was the first really powerful use of the *ison* (the drone note of Byzantine chant); the resonating richness of the sound was breathtaking. As usual Vespers was followed by a light supper, and then it was back to the *catholikon* for a short Compline service and the opportunity to venerate the relics, including in this case the right hand of Saint Dionysios the Areopagite and the left hand of Saint Mary Magdalene—which is incorrupt and from time to time heats up to body temperature! “This,” said one of the fathers, in a memorable understatement, “is rather unusual.” I can only assume he was speaking in comparison with the hundreds of more “usual” Athonite relics!

At this point—it was probably 7:00 p.m. or so—Trevor went to get his camera, and we spent the rest of the evening with Father Maximos, walking first to the cave of Saint Simon, the monastery’s founder, just a short distance outside the gate and around a bend in the road leading past the monastery’s aqueduct. Here we passed through a small anteroom, from which we were able to climb a narrow rock-cut stairway onto a tiny ledge where the saint slept. Tradition has it that Saint Simon, emerging from this grotto on a mid-thirteenth-century Christmas Eve, caught sight of the Star of Bethlehem in the sky. A single shaft of light was shining down upon the huge rock tower upon which Simonopetra (Greek for “Simon’s rock”) now stands, and a voice told him that here he should build a monastery: hence its dedication to the Nativity. In recent times Saint Mary Magdalene has come to be regarded as a second founder of the community, for after the great fire of 1891 the abbot, who was already traveling in Russia with the saint’s hand, was able to raise money for rebuilding the monastery by displaying this wonder-working miracle in many cities.

We continued walking along the road further up the hill above the monastery. Simonopetra has the best view of the peak of Athos of any place we have yet stayed, and we paused at several exquisite vantage points for photographs—including one of Trevor and me taken by our obliging new friend. We came at last to a small grassy plateau, a spot to which the monks process every Bright Monday with all the monastery's relics and many of its icons. Back down the hill we spent a few minutes opposite Saint Simon's cave in a small gazebo, catching sight of a small pod of dolphins cavorting just off shore in water that was growing increasingly gilded by the soon-to-set sun. We then continued further down, down through a number of terraces to a point below the monastery where the gardener, Father Mardarios, was busily taking advantage of the cool of the evening. Father Maximos told us that this one wiry monk—a veritable elf out of Middle-earth—was almost solely responsible for planting, tending, and harvesting an extensive, many-terraced array of trees and plants, including grapes, figs, beans, peppers, tomatoes, apricots. The terraces are connected by a network of ladders and steps that have been cut into the walls, and as we clambered down one of the ladders from one heavily-vined plot to the next, Father Maximos observed, very rightly, that it was all rather like Swiss Family Robinson!

Father Mardarios soon finished his work and joined us on the balcony of his workshed, where he insisted on our having some ice water, almonds, and little cookies as we enjoyed the sunset and talked about his gardening methods (organic except during droughts and other “extreme situations”), the sources of electrical power at the monastery (solar first, then hydro, then a back-up diesel generator), and the importance of obedience in the monastic life (he told us a story about a monk he had heard about in a nearby cell who disobeyed his elder by going fishing without the elder's blessing and was eaten by a shark!). I expressed my amazement at the incredible labor and skill involved in his care of the extensive gardens, to which he responded that it was “all God and Saint Triphon”, the patron saint of gardeners, whose icon was appropriately positioned in a little shrine near the greenhouse.

As the evening unfolded we had an opportunity to talk at some length with Father Maximos about Athonite spirituality. I asked at one point whether there is such a thing as

a “typical prayer rule” for the monks. His answer was no, but he also stressed that one’s cell rule was never discussed with anyone except one’s spiritual father, so that “except for the *geron* nobody really knows, or should know, what others are doing”. Generally speaking, however, one could certainly say that each of the fathers probably uses some form of the Jesus Prayer during the hours before Orthros, but how many times it is repeated, according to what rhythm and at what speed, with or without how many *metanias* (bows) or *proskyneses* (prostrations), over what length of time—all this can vary considerably.

This discussion gave Father Maximos an opportunity to talk about the differences between monastic communities. I mentioned the Elder Ephraim and the several communities he has established in America, notably Saint Anthony’s in Florence, Arizona. Father Maximos observed that this elder was known for the rigor of his teaching. Philotheou, from which Ephraim launched his American mission, had been described to us elsewhere on the Mountain as rather like a Marine boot camp. By contrast the now retired (and very ill) Abbot Aimilianos, the elder of many of the monks at Simonopetra, always insisted on joy as an essential element in the spiritual life, and indeed we had noticed more smiling monks here than elsewhere. Father Maximos described a far more relaxed spiritual ethos at Simonopetra in general, and specifically between each of the monks and the abbot. He spoke of someone he knew eating too many cookies when he was serving as guest master and of this person going to the abbot and asking to be given the obedience of no longer eating them, or at least a limit on how many he could eat. “I’m not going to tell you what to do,” the abbot responded. “You’ve got to do this for yourself!” In the same vein he remarked that the spiritual life should be guided, not by inflexible rules that all and sundry must follow, but by “what works”. I thought of the Buddhist idea of *upāya*, or “skillful means”. And of course different strategies work best for different people, he added.

The fathers of Simonopetra speak a great deal, and very reverently, about the former abbot, Aimilianos, widely regarded as a living saint and true Hesychast, and of the extent and depth of his spiritual influence, both on the Mountain and elsewhere throughout the world. One of the fathers had come to the monastery years earlier as a pilgrim. Someone brushed past

him while he was standing in the courtyard one evening, lightly touching him on the shoulder, and it was as if he felt suddenly “empty”—of his ego and everything associated with the world—and thus correspondingly open to the plenitude of God. It turned out the person who had touched him was Aimilianos. We were also told that Father Aimilianos had said, upon first meeting the monastery’s present abbot when the latter was only fourteen, that this would be his successor, and so it was almost forty years later. Many, many hours of Father Aimilianos’s talks were recorded and are available for the fathers to listen to in the monastery library.

Coda

Back to Ouranoupolis, we spent the rest of this day decompressing and reacquainting ourselves with the ways of “this world”: enjoying a much larger meal than we had had for a week, browsing in the little shops—where I secured a lovely hand-painted copy of the Virgin as *ephor* (overseer) of Mount Athos, one of the favorites of the monks—and noticing repeatedly what exotic-looking creatures women are!

I decided to take an evening stroll down a dirt and gravel road leading out of the village and winding back along the coast in the direction of the Mountain. About a half hour outside of town the road simply comes to an end. There is a small quarry to one side, where they appeared to be breaking rock into slate tiles, and on the other side a little *metochion* (dependency) of one of the monasteries, sitting like a guardhouse on the border of another world. Two large signs stood nearby, one in Greek and one in English, with the same forbidding message: “Access to the Holy Mountain of Athos strictly prohibited. Border patrolled. Entry restricted to ferry to Daphne/Karyes”—as if, I thought, the density of the surrounding underbrush and the ruggedness of the landscape were not enough to deter all but the most seasoned hikers and rock climbers from attempting an overland entry!

It was a curious sensation, having been to Mount Athos, now to confront so daunting a barrier. Something in me wanted to feel a bit smug, privileged, in-the-know. I, after all, had been to this forbidden place, circumventing these doubtless feeble patrols and their ineffective warnings! I had walked within the Secret Garden and was now safely returned to tell the tale. Thankfully, these foolish musings were quickly repelled by

a rapid series of questions: *Had* I really been there? Was I ever *truly* on the other side of this barrier? And what in any case *is* the “other side”? How many depths within depths does it have? What outermost skin had I only just lightly brushed, and how much more must there be to the breathing, beating life within?

I think of the concluding paragraph of one of Father Maximos’s articles, a copy of which he was kind enough to give me:

“We expect, and perhaps demand, that every revelation be an unveiling, a drawing aside of the curtain, a lifting of the veil. But when the object of revelation is not an object at all, but that which is invisible and beyond predication, then it can give itself to us only through an event or appearance that is also a concealing. Divine transcendence, divine hiddenness, remains absolute, and yet providentially reveals itself by concealing itself in a sacred veil, which is at once the revelation of, and means of participation in, the very life of God” (“Symeon of Thessalonike and the Theology of the Icon Screen”, *Thresholds of the Sacred*, ed. Sharon E. J. Gerstel [Harvard University Press, 2006], p. 183).