PRAISE FOR

SHORT TRIP TO THE EDGE

"Scott Cairns is not only one of the most vital poets of our time but also a prose writer of uncommon vision, and in *Short Trip to the Edge*, his account of his pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain of Athos in northern Greece, he weaves together a personal history of faith, a wealth of learning, and the wisdom of the ages to create a book for spiritual seekers from every religious denomination. What better guide, and travel companion, than Scott Cairns? I would follow him to the edge—and beyond."

—Christopher Merrill, author of *Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain*

In *Short Trip to the Edge*, Scott Cairns pulls back the curtain and gives us a glimpse of the spiritual energy present on the Holy Mountain. He approaches his prose with the soul and skill of a poet. It is at once simple and profound—accessible and ineffable. Scott has the boldness to confront the deepest parts of our human nature with fierce honesty and humor. It's a place where "pilgrims are a mixed bag," holy relics make the heart race, and true spirituality is an "acquired taste." The reader (or should I say pilgrim) is invited to travel along a beautiful and potentially frightening road into the heart of silence, repentance, and prayer. There is a palpable sense of being there: surrounded by a timeless chorus of voices chanting on the Holy Mountain, praying for the life of the world. One slowly loses the desire to arrive and begins to embrace the possibility of "always becoming." Scott Cairns pours out his soul in this brilliant and much-needed book. It is well worth the taking—this short trip to the edge!

—Jonathan Jackson, star of the hit ABC show *Nashville*; author of *The Mystery Of Art*

"*Short Trip to the Edge* is an exceptional and compelling book. Scott Cairns has a poet's eye and a storyteller's flair, so that mystical experience and profound theology are bodied forth in memorable images and vivid scenes, instead of being lost in abstraction. This book witnesses to the way ancient truths can become vivid, true, and life-changing in the here and now. This is a short trip you will never forget."

—Revd. Dr. Malcolm Guite, Girton College, Cambridge, England

What do you say about the spiritual memoir of such a big-hearted poet? A man who is willing to act as your eyes and ears, to guide you along tricky mountain pathways you yourself will never walk? Who spirits you inside ancient katholikons in the dead of night to venerate impossibly old, impossibly golden icons? Who tells you, shyly, that prayer is soaking his beard with tears? You say *Efharisto*. You say *Doxa to Theo*. You say, bless you, Scott Cairns, for this beautiful book that is already changing my life.

—Paula Huston, author of *The Holy Way* and *One Ordinary Sunday*

SHORT TRIP TO THE EDGE

A Pilgrimage to Prayer

SCOTT CAIRNS

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For Jackson Browne, whose songs during the ’70s
made me want to become a poet.

For Annie Dillard, my teacher, whose prose during
the ’70s showed me how to be one.

For Richard Howard, my friend, whose loving attention
to the word I now recognize as true veneration.

CONTENTS

PREAMBLE

In spring of 2006, I first published *Short Trip to the Edge*, an account of my first three pilgrimages to *Agion Oros*, the Holy Mountain—a monastic peninsula in northern Greece that is perhaps more widely known as Mount Athos. It is, to be sure, a uniquely holy place, one of those places our Celtic saints would have characterized as *a thin place*. I understand their sense of such places as physical spaces in which the veil between heaven and earth seems transparent or porous, sites whose substance thins to yield apprehension of an occasion of greater substance; in my thinking, a more likely characterization of such scenes would be that they themselves have attained a palpable presence of the invisible enormity in which we live and move and have our being; that is, the places themselves register as *thick*, *full*, *densely inhabited by holy presence*.

Since those first three visits in 2004 and 2005, I have, at this writing, made an additional seventeen pilgrimages. Much has happened in the interim, and much more is afoot. Therefore, I had hoped for this edition to expand the epilogue of the original text in order to bring the reader a sense of an ongoing synergy, the collaboration between heaven and earth—which is what the Holy Mountain represents, and what the Holy Mountain performs. As it happens, the much more that is afoot is not quite ready for prime time; that is to say, we must be patient—which, among many other lessons from the fathers, is something I'm better at now than I was when I set out.

In the meantime, I have sought to correct what many have identified as an oversight; this edition includes both maps and photographs. This edition also does what I should have done from the first; with two exceptions—those of Father Iákovos and Father Matthew—I have changed the names of my beloved fathers in hopes of mitigating any undue attention to them, attention which might make more difficult the lives of prayer to which they are, by God's grace, committed.

Please accept this new edition as one that corrects certain errors of an enthusiastic pilgrim, and one that further extends the narrative to account for another several years along the way. *Good journey*, as the Greeks like to say—Καλό ταξίδι! *Good road*—Καλό δρόμο!

May your way be blessed.

Setting Out

In time, even the slowest pilgrim might
articulate a turn. Given time enough,

the slowest pilgrim—even he—might
register some small measure of belated

progress. The road was, more or less, less
compelling than the hut, but as the benefit

of time allowed the hut's distractions to attain
a vaguely musty scent, and all the novel

knickknacks to acquire a fine veneer of bone-
white dust, the road became then somewhat more

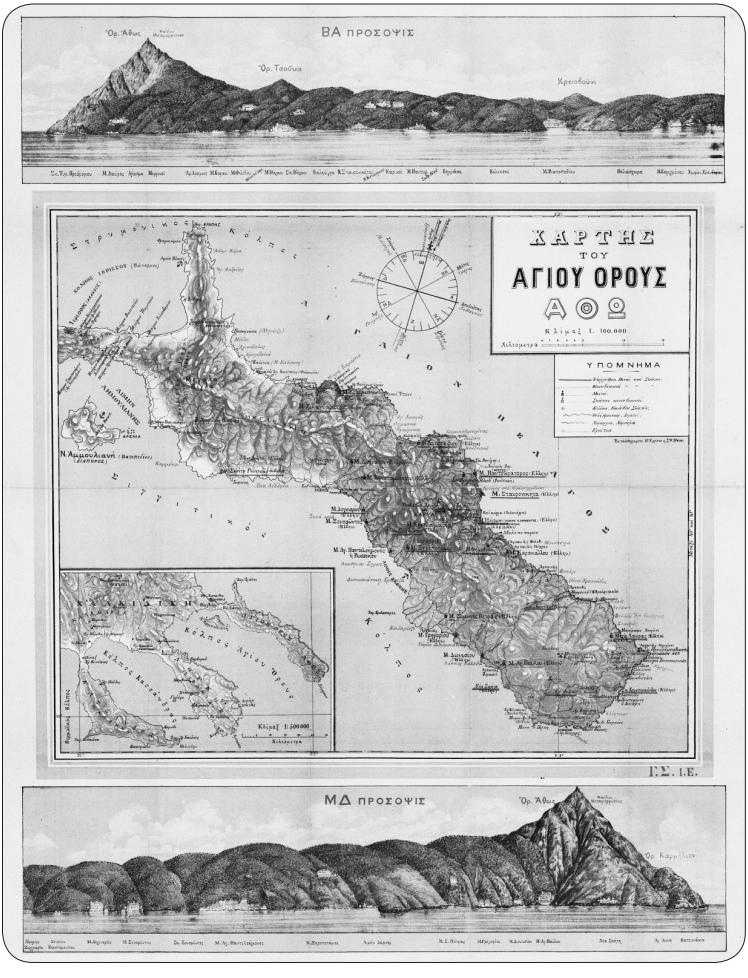
attractive; and as the weather made a timely
if quite brief concession, the pilgrim took this all

to be an open invitation to set out.

PART ONE

THE FAR

Ouranoúpoli: Heaven's City



The Holy Mountain

1

Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

The boat is the *Áxion Estín*, and I am finally on the boat.

The concrete pier at the bow marks the end of the world, where lies a modest village with an ambitious name; it is *Ouranoúpoli*, Heaven's City. We remain bound to its bustling pier by two lengths of rope as thick as my thigh.

Any moment now, the boat will be loosed and let go, and we will be on our way to *Agion Oros*, the Holy Mountain.

The air is sun-drenched, salt-scented, cool, and pulsing with a riot of gulls and terns dipping to grab bits of bread laid upon the water for them. The Aegean reflects the promising blue of a robin's egg. A light breeze dapples the surface, reflecting to some degree the tremor I'm feeling just now in my throat.

I've been planning this trip for most of a year.

I've been on this journey for most of my life.

For a good while now, the ache of my own poor progress along that journey has been escalating. It has reached the condition of a dull throb, just beneath the heart.

By which I mean, more or less, that *when I had traveled half of our life's way, I found myself stopped short, as within a dim forest.*

Or, how's this—*as I walked through that wilderness, I came upon a certain place, and laid me down to sleep: as I slept, I dreamed, and saw a man clothed with rags, standing with his face turned away from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. He opened the book, and read therein; and, as he read, he wept and shook, and cried out, saying, What shall I do?*

Here's the rub: *by the mercy of God I am a Christian; by my deeds, a great sinner.*

You might recognize some of that language. You might even recognize the sentiment. These lines roughly paraphrase the opening words of three fairly famous pilgrims, the speakers of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Russian devotional favorite known as *The Way of a Pilgrim*.

In each of them I find a trace of what Saint Paul writes to the church in Rome in the first century: *I do not understand what it is I do. For what I want to do, I do not do; but what I hate, I do*.

I get it. I really do get it.

In each of these confessions I suspect a common inference as well: something is amiss. There is a yawning gap between where I am and where I mean to go.

Lately, the crux of my matter has come pretty much down to this: having said prayers since childhood, I startled one day to the realization that—at the middling age of forty—I had not yet learned to pray.

At any rate, despite half a lifetime of mostly good intentions, I had not established anything that could rightly be called *a prayer life*.

I remember the moment of this realization with startling clarity, and with a good dose of chagrin. I was romping at the beach with Mona, our yellow Labrador. It was a gorgeous morning in early spring—absolutely clear, the air still crisp, tasting of salt from the bay, the water and sky mirroring a mutual, luminous turquoise.

I was throwing a stick of driftwood, repeatedly—as instructed in no uncertain terms by my ecstatic dog—into the Chesapeake for her to retrieve, and I was delighting in the sheer beauty of her astonishing leaps into the surf—wholehearted, jubilant, tireless—followed by her equally tireless insistence that I keep it up. She yelped, she pranced, she spun like a dervish as water poured from her thick coat into the flat sheen of sand at the water's edge.

In short, I was in a pretty good mood.

I was sporting cut-off jeans in February. I was barefoot. I was romping with my dog at the beach.

I was not the least bit depressed, nor even especially thoughtful. I had hardly a thought in my head at all.

I was, even so, feeling a good deal—feeling, actually, pretty pleased with myself, and feeling especially pleased with that radiant morning on the shore, accompanied by a deliriously happy dog. My best guess is that, after some years of high anxiety, I was finally relaxed enough to suspect the trouble I was in.

We had moved to Virginia Beach about a year earlier, having arrived there with a palpable sense of reprieve from a stint of—as I have come to speak of it—having *done time in Texas*. I had left a difficult and pretty much thankless teaching-and-program-directing job in north Texas in favor of a similar but far more satisfying gig at Old Dominion University in Norfolk. We'd extricated our little family—by which I mean me, Marcia, our ten-year-old Liz, and our five-year-old Ben—from our rundown cottage in a rundown corner of a small (and, at the time, relatively rundown) north Texas town; we'd swapped those derelict digs for a bright, airy bungalow by the beach.

The contrast was stunning. Our first evening there, in fact, sitting at an oceanfront café, we were treated to the spectacle of a dozen or more dolphins frolicking northward as they proceeded to the mouth of the Chesapeake half a mile up.

Life looked good. It looked *very* good. It even *tasted* good.

I felt as if I had found my body again after having misplaced it for four intermittently numbing years in exile. I had even started running again, running on the Chesapeake beach or along the state-park bike path most mornings before heading off to my job in Norfolk.

In the midst of such bounty and such promise, and provoked by nothing I could name, I suddenly thought what might seem like a strange thought under the circumstances. At the age of forty, I had accomplished only this: I saw how far I had gotten off track.

It was as if those difficult years in Texas had somehow distracted me from seeing that the real work—the interior work—was being neglected. And, to be honest, my difficulty with a handful of colleagues there and a regrettable lack of humility on my part had led me to speak and act in ways I knew, even at the time, to be wrong, ways that ate at me still.

Shame is a curious phenomenon. It can provoke further, entrenched, and shameful response—compounding the shame, compounding the poor response, ad infinitum—or like a sharp and stinging wind it can startle even the dullest of us into repentance. Now that my job was once again rewarding, now that my family was safe and happy, I relaxed enough to glimpse a subtle reality: I saw how far I stood from where I'd meant to be by now.

Rather, I saw how far I stood from where I'd meant to be by *then*.

I have recently turned fifty. And though it is possible that some progress has been made in the intervening ten years of *meantime*, that progress has been very slow, negligible, and remarkably unsteady, with virtually every advance being followed, hard on the heels, by an eclipsing retreat—with hard words, harsh thoughts, continuing to undermine any accomplishment in the realms of charity and compassion.

In his Christmas oratorio, *For the Time Being*, the beloved Mr. Auden puts it in a way that never fails to resonate with me, to slap me awake when I recite his poem (which I do as a matter of course every Christmas Eve): "To those who have seen / The Child, however dimly, however incredulously, / The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all."

I get that, too.

Wise men and women of various traditions have troubled the terms *being* and *becoming* for centuries without arriving at anything like conclusion. Every so often, though, I glimpse that some of the trouble may derive from our merely being, when—as I learned to say in Texas—we *might could be* becoming.

I wonder if we aren't fashioned to be *always* becoming, and I wonder if the dry taste in my mouth isn't a clue—and even a nudge—that staying put is, in some sense, an aberration, even if it may also be a commonplace.

I have been a Christian virtually all of my life, have hoped, all of my life, to eventually find my way to some measure of . . . what? Spirituality? Maturity? Wisdom? I'd hoped, at least, to find my way to a sense of equanimity, or peace, or . . . *something*.

As one Desert Father, Abba Xanthias, observed—clearly anticipating my Labrador—"A dog is better than I am, for he has love and he does not judge."

At the age of forty, I raised my arm to fling a sodden stick into the Chesapeake; I looked down to see my beautiful, dripping yellow dog—braced, alert, eager, her eyes lit up with wild expectation. I didn't want to let her down.

My life at that precise moment reminds me of the bumper sticker I saw years ago: *I want to be the man that my dog thinks I am*.

More generally, my life at that moment reminds me of an often-repeated comment one monk made to a visitor to Mount Athos. I imagine it like this: The visitor asks what it is that the monks *do* there; and the monk, looking up from the black wool of the prayer rope he is tying, stares off into the distance for a moment, silent, as if wrestling with the answer. Then he meets the other man's eyes *very* directly and says: "We fall down, and we get up again."

A little glib, but I think I get the point.

Monks, it turns out, can seem a little glib on occasion, and I've noticed that they have a general penchant for the oblique; but I'll have more to say about that by and by.

As for me, at the moment when my brilliant day at the beach was suddenly clouded by an encroaching unease, I saw that I was less like that diligent monk, and more like the actor in the TV ad who says *I've fallen, and I can't get up*.

Even if the monk's words do offer a glimpse of a truth that is available to us all, I keep thinking that—for the saints, for the monks, for the genuinely wise, presumably for anyone but me—the subsequent fall needn't seem so completely to erase all previous progress.

I keep thinking that, for the pilgrim hoping to make any progress at all, the falling down must eventually become less, that the rising up must become something more—more of a steady ascent, and more lasting.

I also have an increasing sense that the subsequent fall need not be inevitable.

I keep thinking that this is actually possible: the proposition of spiritual development that leads us into becoming, and—as the fathers and mothers of the Eastern Christian tradition would have it—into always becoming.

The question must be how to get from here to there.

And that question has pressed me to get serious, to slap myself awake, take up my bed, and get to walking.

I hope to be, at long last, a pilgrim on the way.

The boat—whose name means *It Is Worthy*—is backing away from the chaos of crates and trucks and the crowd of very loud, very animated men burdening the concrete pier. With a shudder and a plume of diesel smoke, the ferry discovers a forward gear and angles out, pressing into the Aegean's dappled blue.

I was a little puzzled, at first, by the size of the crowd boarding the boat. And, a little earlier in the morning, I was a little panicked that my friend Nick and I had to wait to see if there would be room for us to join them. We had made the necessary arrangements to enter Mount Athos on this date, but hadn't known to reserve tickets for the boat itself. Let that be a lesson for somebody.

Given a well-publicized daily limit of 134 pilgrims—120 Orthodox Christians and 14 "others" who are allowed to enter the Holy Mountain—I had no idea there would be so many pressing to catch the morning ferry, easily four hundred men, probably more.

I was puzzled, as well, by the early-morning demeanor of some of my fellow travelers. Though we were embarking around 9:30 AM, a good dozen or so were sipping cans of Amstel lager, and many of them were obviously nursing serious hangovers. Not just a few seemed still to be drunk, and one was passed out between two comrades who kept him from falling over—for the most part.

The official limit of 134 men, it turns out, applies only to the uninvited. There is apparently no limit for visiting monks, Orthodox clergy, or for those pilgrims who have made arrangements to visit their spiritual fathers by invitation.

Still, those particular exceptions didn't absolutely account for the drunks.

The official limit doesn't apply to laborers either. In recent years, reconstruction support has come to Mount Athos from the European Union and from various public and private sources in predominantly Orthodox countries. Of the twenty monasteries and the dozen-plus sketes, virtually all are undergoing some degree of reconstruction and repair. Some, like Chelandári and Simonópetra, have suffered recent losses from fire, but all have suffered the toll of time. Megistis Lavra, Saint Panteleímon, and Saint Andrew's Skete, for instance, appear to have a good many more derelict structures than usable ones. A thousand years can erode a lot of stone and mortar, rot a lot of wood—even the iron-like chestnut beams and boards used for most wooden structures on the Holy Mountain. As a result, Mount Athos is occupied daily by an army of excavators, stonemasons, and carpenters; this morning, they weren't all hungover, but all bore the demeanors of men on their way to a day (or several weeks) of serious labor. I really couldn't blame them for their grim looks.

And I have to say that, progressively, during the boat ride, as the reality of Mount Athos began to weigh on my idealized, abstract expectations, I guessed that I, too, was on my way to work.

It wasn't until Nick and I had stowed our backpacks under our seats and were stretched out, feeling the sun on our faces, that any of this began to feel real. Nick, by the way, is Nick Kalaitzandonakes. And Nick—as you might have noticed from his substantial surname—is Greek. If you were Greek, you would also gather—also from his name—that his family originally hails from Crete. Nick is also an American, having been naturalized about fifteen years ago. He is married to the indefatigable Julie, and they have two beautiful, busy kids, Maria and Yorgo—both brilliant, and each, in his or her own way, full of beans.

Nick and I have served together on the parish council of our Saint Luke the Evangelist Orthodox Church since before it *was* a parish council, since before we even had a parish. We were just a "mission

steering committee" at first, working to establish the first-ever Orthodox church in mid-Missouri. It worked out pretty well.

Nick is also a colleague at the University of Missouri, where I teach poetry writing and American literature in the English department, and where he is an agricultural economist. Nick was also, for the first five days of this first pilgrimage, my guide and translator.

So far, my Greek is very lame. As with about seven other languages, however, I maintain certain priorities. I can manage—politely even—to get myself fed in Greek. And I can order red wine—or single-malt scotch, when it's available. On this trip, I also learned how to reserve a room, pay a tab, count my change, and shove my way onto a bus. Nick, on the other hand, could help with the occasional theological discussion, and he's a pretty funny guy, to boot. Nick is also, as it happens, a pilgrim.

———

At that moment on the deck—with the breeze whipping up white caps on the Aegean, the ferry boat tooling along in what I swear was a confident, dactylic rhythm, and with the first monastic enclaves coming into view along the shore—I realized that I was *really* going to the Holy Mountain.

Mount Athos has always been a unique phenomenon, and, for most folks, it remains a downright puzzling phenomenon; its uniqueness and puzzlement are all the more pronounced in the twenty-first century, when ancient pursuits like monasticism, asceticism, and hesychasm (*EH see kazm*—that is, the pursuit of stillness) strike the modern psyche as anachronistic, extreme, and maybe a little perverse.

The monks also follow the Julian—which is to say, the "Old"—calendar, and this involves a tweaking of dates to a point thirteen days behind where you thought you were.

Think of it as a cosmic pressure to slow down—or, maybe better, as a metaphor for our failure to know, even, where we stand, or when. Then don't think about it again. The monks are, for the most part, gracious enough to suppose where and when you think you are, and will play along.

Oh, and one other thing: the clock. The hours of the day begin at sundown rather than at midnight. Not to worry; you'll catch on.

The easternmost of three peninsulas—easily the steepest and rockiest of three long fingers of steep and rocky land—reaching south into the Aegean from that region of northeastern Greece known as Halkidikí, the peninsula of Mount Athos is about thirty-four miles in length and varies between five and eight miles across, covering less than 250 square miles total; the sharply rising terrain moves precipitously from sea level to 6,700 feet, which is the summit of the Mount Athos peak itself, very near the southern tip of the peninsula.

In physical terms, then, the area of the Holy Mountain isn't much. In spiritual terms, it is immense, impossible to chart.

Archaeological evidence suggests that since as early as the second century ascetics have lived here in pursuit of prayer—in pursuit of, rather, *lives of prayer*. I'll get to what I mean by the italics soon enough. Or nearly soon enough. By and by.

Since the third century—and perhaps even earlier—ascetics desiring lives of prayer have lived in community here. Over the next seventeen hundred years, the precise number of these communities has varied, witnessing intermittent increase and decline; some documents indicate that as many as 180 such communities flourished at one point. The establishment of these communities appears to have occurred in two distinct waves, an early wave during the third through fifth centuries, and a second, more pronounced wave commencing in the tenth century (*Megistis Lavras*, founded in 963, is agreed to have been the earliest of these) and continuing into the fourteenth century.

Today there are twenty such communities recognized as "ruling monasteries"; because Mount Athos operates as a virtually autonomous political state, representatives from these twenty constitute the Holy Mountain's governing body. While seventeen are identified as Greek, one as Bulgarian, one as Serbian, and one as Russian, the Holy Mountain includes a full array of Orthodox nationalities, including good numbers of Romanian, Moldavian, Ukrainian, English, American, and Australian monks. There are also a dozen or more *sketes*; some

of these are very like monasteries, but ostensibly—with a few notable exceptions—smaller. Each skete is a dependency of one of the twenty ruling monasteries, on whose lands it rests. Some, like the Romanian *Skíti Timiou Prodromou* (named after "the Forerunner," Saint John the Baptist), the Russian *Skíti Agios Andrea*s (Saint Andrew's Skete), and *Skíti Profiti Ilíou* (Prophet Elias Skete), look very like full-fledged monasteries, with a central *katholikón* protected within a high-walled structure; others, including *Skíti Agias Annis* (Saint Anna's Skete) and *Nea Skíti* (New Skete), appear more like thriving residential communities spread across the steep Athonite slope, dotted with churches, chapels, and monastic *kéllia*, or cells. There are, as well, throughout the Athonite wilderness, many scattered, communal farm dwellings, *kalyves* (communal huts), *kathismáta* (smaller huts for single monks), and *hesychastería* (squat huts or simple caves etched in a cliff face for the most ascetic of hermits, an increasingly rare breed).

The twenty ruling monasteries are now all *coenobitic*, in which the monks all follow a common rule. Until recently, some were *idiorrythmic*, in which the monks pursued more individualized ascetic practice, often allowing for a more demanding rule. The idiorrythmic approach—still observed in many of the sketes and smaller dependencies—is thought by some to be an aberration of the ideal monastic community, albeit a historic necessity brought about during foreign occupation by Franks, Turks, and so on. Others understand the idiorrythmic rule of the skete to be more aptly suited to those monks who are permitted a more strenuous ascesis.

In either case, the monastic rule has always revolved around prayer. And fasting, too—but fasting as a tool assisting prayer. It is safe to say that nothing about life on Mount Athos is understood as an end in itself, and that everything deliberate about life on Mount Athos is undertaken to accommodate prayer. Prayer is undertaken to accommodate union with God—what those in the business like to call *théosis*.

We should probably stick to prayer for now, but théosis is the crux of our matter, and that is where—I pray—we will eventually arrive.

Odd as Mount Athos may appear by contemporary standards, the Holy Mountain is visited by hundreds of pilgrims every month. The generally balmy weather and calm seas of spring, summer, and fall bring boatload after boatload scrambling to visit the steep and rocky slopes, the deep forests of chestnut, pine, and juniper, and the ancient enclaves; though wintertime draws relatively fewer, they arrive daily and by the dozens even so—whenever the weather-driven surf allows the ferry boats to dock.

That is to say, year-round, pilgrims arrive at Mount Athos virtually every day, looking for something. One friend (now a novice monk at Simonópetra) told me that a good many visitors come in search of healing from serious illness—their own or that of a loved one—some arrive because their marriages are failing or have failed, some come to kick an addiction or two, and some few arrive because they are drawn to a fuller sense of prayer.

Most of them are Orthodox Christians, and most are from Greece; a good number arrive from other parts of eastern Europe, notably Romania and Russia. Concurrent with the rise of Eastern Orthodoxy in English-speaking countries, many also come from England, Australia, and North America. Many non-Orthodox arrive as well; from what I could gather, many of these are from Germany and other parts of western Europe.

As I mentioned, the daily limit for entry to the Holy Mountain is 120 Orthodox and 14 non-Orthodox men. Since a vote among resident monks in the year 1045 and a subsequent edict of Emperor Constantine in 1060, women are not allowed entry at all, ever.

This last bit seems to many—as it has seemed to me—to be the most archaic element of the entire operation, an element that, for some of us, threatens to turn *admirably quaint* into *regrettably anachronistic*, verging right up on the cusp of *damned insulting*. Granted, there are many monastic communities, East and West, that choose to limit their communities to one gender or the other; the Athonite monasteries are not unique in that respect. Many convents exclude men; many monasteries exclude women.

Be that as it may, Mount Athos is an entire peninsula, an entire monastic republic, and—some would say—the spiritual center of the entire Eastern Church. So, the exclusion of women strikes the casual observer as extreme, not just a little misogynistic. That sense is not much mitigated by the fact that this prohibition extends to female animals in general—save those among the wild animals and the countless cats who are pleased to keep both the rats and the vipers nicely in check.

Explanations abound, of course. One tradition has it that the Virgin Mary (whom, incidentally, the Orthodox call *Theotokos*, or *God-bearer*), traveling by ship with Saint John en route to visit Lazarus (then bishop of Cyprus), was blown off course, coming upon this beautiful peninsula. Moved by its beauty and isolation, the Virgin prayed to her Son that it might become hers to protect. The story goes that this was, and remains, a done deal.

Some legends include miraculous, audible warnings to historical female visitors—one of them being the stepmother of Muhammad the Conqueror; she had come to return the gifts of the Magi to the Christians near the site of today's monastery of Saint Paul (where those relics are now kept). By and large, the legends share one element: women are not to come here, and if they *do* come here, they shouldn't plan on sticking around.

My own guess is that the *lives of prayer* these men seek to acquire are understood by them to be more possible in an environment where certain long-standing human failures—pride, greed, violence, lust, and so on—are mitigated by a lack of opportunity. The absence of women effectively takes at least one species of error off the table, and indirectly protects the monks from a good many others. Call it self-defense against certain aspects of the self.

That said, notable exceptions have been made in the past. In particular, during the Greek civil war—which occurred in the aftermath of World War II—the monasteries of Mount Athos offered sanctuary to many women and girls fleeing the brutality of mainland atrocities. The monks made places for them, saw that they were fed, and kept them

safe for the duration of the hostilities. When, back on the mainland, the coast was clear, the monks promptly cleared the Athonite coast of women.

I hoped to ask, at one point or another, about this continuing prohibition of what are, generally speaking, my favorite people. I hoped to hear an explanation that didn't sound quite so specious as the ones I'd heard so far. Mostly, I hoped at some point even to understand it, suspecting that, as with a good many things, the business might look different from the inside than it does from the outside.

On the *Áxion Estín*, leaning into the headwind at the bow, I was waking to the fact that Nick and I, after many months of planning and anticipation, would soon be inside, setting foot on land blessed by centuries of prayer—genuine prayer, prayer of a sort I could only suspect, and desire.

Soon, I'd be walking through what the Orthodox call "the garden of the Theotokos."

I hoped, moreover, to come upon a holy man, an adept, a spiritual father, who could help me to pray.

It was more than a little daunting.

In a curious and surprising way, the bleary-eyed stonecutter slumped next to me, picking at the bandage on his knuckle, became something of a comfort.

2

Lord, he said, teach us to pray.

Before this, my only experiences with the Holy Mountain had come through texts—ancient and modern—and through an abundance of imagery—both verbal and photographic—found on the Internet. My expectations, therefore, were guarded. I knew that many holy men had lived here over the centuries, and I knew enough to suspect that many holy men still did. I didn't expect to find a *staretz* exactly, but I did hope to find a spiritual guide—someone farther along the journey than I, someone who might help me to pray, as it were, always.

From the boat, the first monastic structures that came to view were small, discreet hermitages.

Actually, these first structures were but the *ruins* of small, discreet hermitages.

In the days ahead, similar ruins, scattered along the shores and along the remote footpaths, would do their peculiar work on me, deepening my sense of how long men had struggled here, and making palpable an ascetic isolation that has endured here for more than fifteen hundred years.

As more current structures—a white stone hut surrounded by olive groves—came into view, I took a new position, leaning over the shoreward guardrail to take it all in. The first actual monastery along the shore was Docheiaríou. It was huge, a mass of incongruent structural shapes—wooden constructions perched atop and overhanging a variety of soaring stone battlements, centuries of add-ons—from the midst of which the dome and cross of the *katholikón*, the central church, stood out, overshadowed by a tall stone tower commanding the upslope side.

Nick and I stayed on the upper deck to watch as the *Áxion Estín* pulled in to Docheiaríou's *arsanás*, its seaport. On the concrete pier, a middle-aged man in street clothes was bowing to kiss the hand of a

white-haired monk. Before the pilgrim turned to hop onto the ferry's iron ramp, the two embraced warmly, kissing each other on both cheeks, embracing once again.

This scene was a little unsettling. I was, at once, both warmed and—regrettably—a little envious. This pilgrim *had* a spiritual father.

This curious mix of responses was my first taste of one of the great paradoxes of a visit to the Holy Mountain: on Athos, everyone is sure to be confronted, simultaneously and repeatedly, with the opportunity either to be his best or to be his worst.

Our next stop was Xenofóndos, a soaring expanse of stone and wooden structures behind and perched atop a granite fortress—slightly larger-seeming, slightly less incongruent in appearance than Docheiaríou—set at the very edge of the sea. From its center rose a bright yellow construction crane, indicating renovation underway. Here, the scene at the pier was repeated, except in triplicate: three pilgrims and three monks, parting with evident respect and affection. We also left six passengers on the pier—workmen, off-loading bundles of rebar and bags of cement, dragging the load to a waiting flatbed truck.

As the ferry rounded the headland to the immediate south of Xenofóndos, the immense Russian monastery of Saint Panteleímon loomed into view. In terms of scale and beauty, it is frankly astonishing. Commanding easily four times the area of Xenofóndos, the white granite battlements and rectangular buildings are capped in the center by no less that half a dozen sparkling green domes of varying size, all of them glistening as if fashioned of burnished green enamel—many of them the onion domes of the Russian tradition. Moreover, the monastery appeared once to have been far larger; four or more looming structures (each being four to six stories tall and each appearing to cover square footage exceeding that of a football field) stood without roofs or with fragments of failed roofs. Now housing about forty resident monks, the monastery was once home to nearly fifteen hundred in 1903; in the decades that followed, the Russian Revolution took its toll even here. Today (though in *my* experience they make a habit of saying they have no room available), Saint Panteleímon's can accommodate, with

apparent ease, a thousand pilgrims and scholars. The *Áxion Estín* left them a good twenty, fetching away eight.

It was at this point that I sat down on a slatted bench on the sundeck and dug into my backpack for my journal. I had planned to write every afternoon, recapping the events and impressions of the previous twenty-four hours as well as I could; I'd thought to do so in the interval of quiet time before Vespers at whatever monastery I happened to be staying the night. Here I was, still on the boat at 11:00 AM of my first day, growing suddenly anxious that I would forget too much.

And there was something else: something about the presence of Saint Panteleímon monastery—its scale, its antiquity, its glistening beauty—that sparked a familiar hunger in me, a hunger *to come to terms*, if only provisional terms, with what lay before me.

Enormity is the word that came to mind just then.

Better make that *two* words—*Enormity glimpsed*.

I have often startled to a fleeting sense—either within an expanse of landscape or, for that matter, poring over a written page—that there dwells before me an excess, abysmal, roiling beyond what can be grasped. Such a sense is what first led me, even as a child, to savor the language of the Bible.

It is what first led me to the language of poetry as well.

Along the way, I've come to the opinion that *the real*—whatever that may eventually prove to be—will appear, inevitably, as abysmal.

From what I gather, I'm not alone. The general consensus of modern philosophy is that the human circumstance—duly appraised—is unquestionably abysmal. Where I might tweak the consensus view is simply here: I'm guessing that our circumstance—the abyss in which *we live and move and have our being*—need not be apprehended as an abysmal emptiness so much as an abysmal fullness.

An Enormity, I'd say.

Of which, incidentally, the human person is to become a part, a member. Appalling, yes? And abysmal. Cheerfully so, I think.

Still and in the meantime—however one might choose to speak of the accompanying sensations—our glimpses of the real are pretty

much guaranteed to be vertiginous; and any taste one might have for that sensation is admittedly an acquired taste.

I have been working to acquire that taste for a long time now, going on most of thirty years.

Poetry—when it is actually poetry—suits that taste. Sacred texts—when they are pored over and pressed for unexpected and generative meaning—also serve. An expanse of landscape—whether scored and moved by human agency or by more natural activity—can also provide a savory moment availing what cannot be held.

So, as the *Áxion Estín* pushed back from the concrete pier at the foot of the immense monastery of Saint Panteleímon, I had myself another little taste.

And I opened my journal in hopes of *coming to terms*—if provisional terms—with this sense of enormity.

I wrote awhile, or tried to write, glancing up every minute or so to scan the shore as we passed along its edge, the steeply rising slope, the juniper and cypress, the ubiquitous olive groves, and countless white stone ruins.

I scribbled a load of glib banalities off and on for the next several minutes, then realized what I was doing and slammed the notebook shut.

Nick brought me another coffee, and we sipped, sighing audibly, relishing the final leg of our ferry ride as we pushed toward the tiny port of Dáfni, where we'd be getting off the boat.

The Port Village of Dáfni