

Mining Mount Athos

by Robert Gribben

This is an article I wrote for our neighbour, St Mary's Anglican congregation, for their newsletter Ave. I have written various reflections on churches I have visited dedicated to St Mary (you have seen at least one!). This one may be of wider interest! - Robert

As I looked around for another Marian subject for *Ave*, I remembered that a unique corner of Orthodoxy is reserved to her patronage: the forested peninsula on which Mount Athos rises (2033 m). In European Union terms, it is 'the Monastic State of the Holy Mountain' and is home to some 20 Orthodox monasteries and 1500 monks. But no nuns. Nothing female at all, though there seems to be a loophole for hens and cats.



The 'aetiological legend' is this. When the Beloved Disciple and Mary were at the foot of the Cross, the dying Jesus gave them to each other as Mother and Son: thus far it is simply biblical and a tender moment. There is a strong tradition that they both went to live in Ephesus which at that stage was a seaport. The inlet has now silted up. St John took the Blessed Mary sailing out into the Aegean. Their ship was blown off course, indeed right across it, and they were forced to anchor off the easternmost peninsular of Chalkidiki, which reaches out from central Macedonia like three

fingers, with Mount Athos at the tip. When she landed, Mary was overwhelmed by the wild, natural beauty of the mountain. She asked her Son for it to have as a garden and his voice from heaven confirmed it. From that moment the mountain was consecrated to the Mother of God and was out of bounds to all other women. The garden is still much as she left it; the monks have harvested its timber for centuries. A raging bushfire in 1990 destroyed about a third of it, with serious implication for the island's economy.

In 1991 I was General Secretary of the Victorian Council of Churches and had already become aware that our Orthodox members were there largely in name only and seemed to hold back from stronger participation. I was also part of the staff which welcomed the World Council of Churches Assembly to Canberra later that year. There, I met a number of Orthodox heads of churches. Greek Orthodoxy, as we call it in Melbourne, belongs to the jurisdiction not of Athens but of Constantinople (now Istanbul). Its head, the Ecumenical Patriarch, is 'first among equals' of all the Eastern Orthodox Churches.¹ I was delighted to be invited to meet him and in September I flew to Istanbul to do so. Well, I didn't quite manage it: he (His All-Holiness Demetrius I) died on the morning I was due for an audience, and I did indeed see him, but in his coffin. This meant I fell into the hands of the man I'd met in Canberra, Bartholomew, Metropolitan of Chalcedon, who was the next most senior prelate. Before the end of 1991, he was elected Patriarch. Orthodoxy is a familial religion, hierarchical, yes, but not in the western pyramidal style (cf the Vatican). I learned, diplomatically, that there's nothing like being welcomed by Father if you want the family to embrace you.

Having visited the Romanians and Bulgarians, who were both throwing out the Communists at the time, I took a train to Thessaloniki. My monastic host soon helped me obtain my

¹ There are two main branches of Orthodoxy. They divided at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. over how to describe the relation of divinity and humanity in Second Person of the Trinity. Those who belonged to the Byzantine power accepted a 'Definition'; those that didn't were declared heretics, and oddly, none of them was Byzantine. Those Orthodox Churches are known as the 'Oriental Orthodox'! (i.e., Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Syrian, and Syrian Indian ('Malankara').) They can all be found in Melbourne.

visitor's permit, a *diamonitirion*, declaring that I was male, over 18, and had a serious purpose. Only ten non-Orthodox are permitted to visit each day and are limited to four nights' stay. I took a bus to Ouraopoulos and thence by ferry halfway down, to Dafni, and up to Karyes, the capital, where I was admitted. Pilgrim places should be difficult to get to.



I had booked accommodation overnight in four monasteries, Iviron (980 AD, originally Georgian, but now Greek), Stavronikita (1536, the smallest, Greek with Russian support), Vatapedi (972 AD, Greek) and Simonopetra (13th C, Greek) The first three are on the east coast, Simonopetra on the west.

Bishop Ezekiel in Melbourne suggested I start with **Iviron**.

The peninsula is heavily wooded and largely without roads. There were few motor-driven vehicles and no bus or taxi, so I set out on the dirt road into the forest. I began to practice reciting the Jesus Prayer², a syllable per step as I tramped along, but my real petition was soon answered by a farm lorry who offered to drop me off. The guest

master greeted me at the gate with a friendly Australian accent: Father Jeremias, ex-Sydney. He showed me to my room; a firm bed, uncertain electricity, no hot water, no shower, a lavatorial hole in the floor. The evening meal was cold fish in chunks, tomato, feta cheese, bread, grapes, and a yellow white wine, and there were to be two meals a day from now on.

I wisely went to bed because a knock on the door at 4.30 a.m. woke me. I found my way upstairs in the dark to a small chapel dedicated to St Dionysius the Areopagite – it was his feast day – and experienced an unusually intimate celebration of the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, sung by a choir of two melodious priests. I was not expecting to be able to receive communion, but I need to explain Orthodox custom to recount what happened.



A Greek communion loaf. The stamped pattern also indicates where the cube of bread will be cut for the eucharist.

Orthodox worshippers bring loaves of bread baked and stamped in the traditional style and hand it in at a door in the icon-screen. The deacon or priest inside selects the loaf from which he will cut the cube of bread to be crumbed and later put in the chalice, for Orthodox receive communion in both bread and wine from a spoon. Much bread is left over, and this is also cut up and placed in a basket which at one point is passed over the altar and put aside. The liturgy proceeds and the faithful receive communion from that first chosen loaf. As they move away from the altar, they are offered the basket of 'blessed bread' which they may use simply to make sure they have swallowed all the

eucharistic elements; but they may take some home to family who could not be present. That bread is called *antidoron*, which means 'instead of the gifts.' In Melbourne and most Orthodox churches in the west, it might also be offered as a token to any non-Orthodox present.

² The words of the mantra are, in English, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner' or close variation. It is the fundamental personal prayer in Orthodoxy.

That was my ecumenically innocent expectation, so I joined the post-communion line only for Fr Jeremiah to stop and whisper, 'We do not give *antidoron* to non-Orthodox'. I was embarrassed for a moment and even angry (recalling '*Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master's table*', Matt. 15:27), but then: this is their table. And *our* church practice frequently shocks them. It is also true that when Orthodox do offer guests that blessed bread, it is a kind of gift, an anticipation of the day when all Christians can break the same loaf together.³

I had been reading the *Odyssey* on this journey, so now 'dawn had touched the sky with her rose-red fingers', and I broke my fast (baked beans, greens, wine, a sugared fig and a spoonful of sweetmeats – sugar, nuts, sultanas), packed and departed. I was joined on my walk to my next monastery by George, a devout young Greek from Sydney, who showed me his 'rope of beads' which he used to count his Jesus Prayers.⁴ My learning was proceeding.



Ikon of the Theotokos by Theophan of Crete (1546) held at the monastery of Stavronikita.

Our goal was **Stavronikita**, further down the coast, whose principal church was dedicated to Mary and contains a 13th C mosaic ikon of her, but also a whole series of painted ikons by St Theophan of Crete (1546). George received the eucharist, a high moment for him, but I was asked to stand outside the nave in the appropriate dark! Later I had an audience with the abbot (hegumen) Tikhon: he had written a book pointing out the errors of both Rome and Protestants. Ecumenism is a 'pan-heresy', a view commonly held on Athos, where they believe that the west has abandoned and distorted the faith handed to the Apostles which they have faithfully kept. They regard Protestants as a watered-down version of Roman errors. However, it was a letter from the Ecumenical Patriarchate '*Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere*' in 1920 which was an important summons to Christian unity at the beginning of that century.

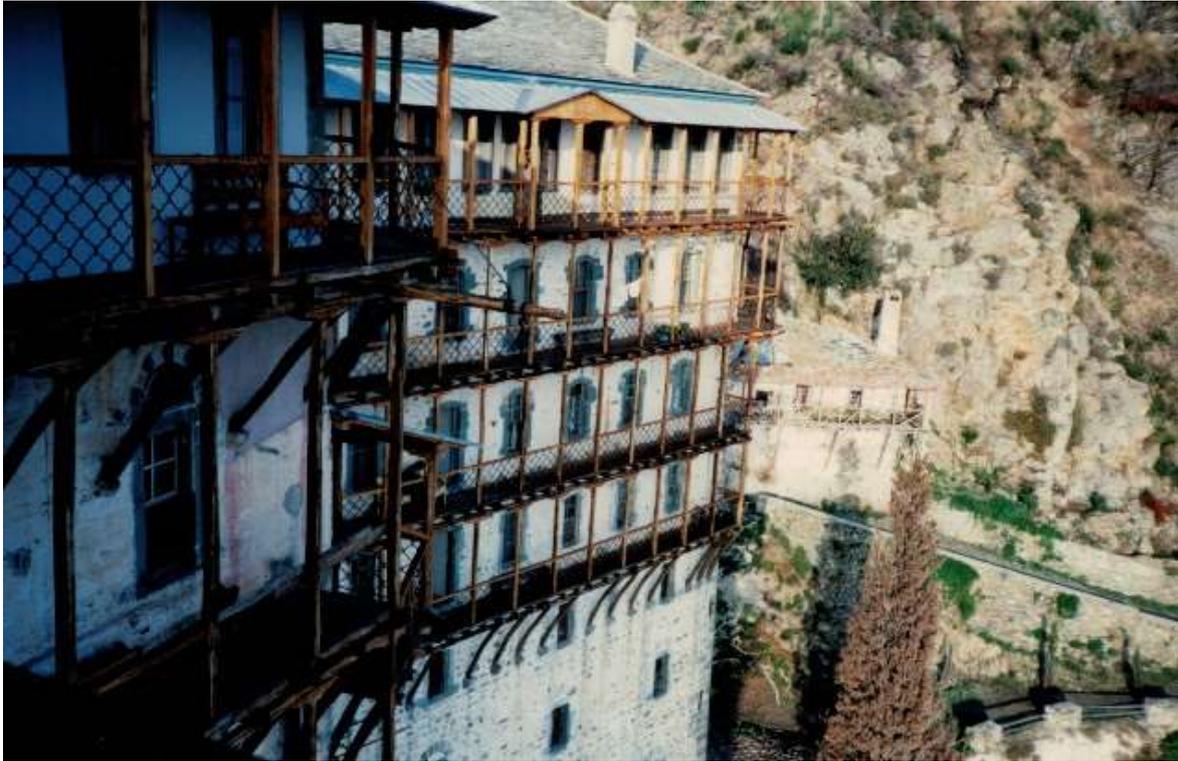


Some of the buildings in the courtyard of Vatopedi monastery.

At **Vatapedi** (972 AD), the guest master was the brother of the Greek priest at Doncaster. They have a huge library of ancient texts. After a glorious choral Liturgy, I was invited to a common room for a drop of raki before breakfast on squid and beans. At each place I was shown the relics they held – e.g., here, St Mary's girdle, woven by herself from camel hair. Orthodoxy has never had a Reformation.

³ It is perhaps worth remembering that until the 1960s, Anglican altars were closed to non-Anglicans; and also, in the same way, for most Australian Lutherans. Roman Catholic canons also forbid giving communion to non-Catholics, whatever a particular priest might choose to do.

⁴ These ropes are often knotted by monks or other dexterous persons but are also commercially available; they may have 33, or 50, or 100 knots.



The spectacular setting of Simonopetra.

My final sojourn was at **Simonopetra** (13th C), which hangs off a rock halfway up a mountain. The climb took 45 minutes, at which point I reached the bottom of its eight floors, the guesthouse being at the top.⁵ There, scarlet-faced and out of breath, I was rewarded with a plate of loukoumi ('Turkish Delight') and a serious shot of raki, which the guest master clearly thought would have medicinal value. The other arrangements were equally beneficial, a lovely light room, with facilities which allowed me to take a real shower, shave and do my laundry. At dinner, I had a chair instead of a bench, and add plums. A final Liturgy, and at breakfast I watched the sun rise over Mount Athos. Then, carefully, all the way down to the ferry for Dafni and Ouranopoulos and back to Thessaloniki.

Learning is not always pleasant; these four days both deeply moved and challenged me. It was rather fun being regarded as a damp Catholic, and there was little point in dialogue: Athos is not the place for that. It was rewarding to try praying in a different way, a permitted, even encouraged exercise, but I missed receiving the eucharist especially as I became more at home in the flow of the liturgy. I will never forget the ikons, not all as well-cared for as they should be. There were things I wasn't allowed to do, although the hospitality was faultless. Here is a form of the Faith which is both stripped down, in fasting and poverty, and lavish, in liturgy. Isolated, but guardians of a culture, a tradition and of great Christian learning. Orthodoxy in general knows that Athos represents both the best and the worst of 'conservatism'; the mountain is a kind of anchor when we are 'tossed about by the waves and whirled around by every fresh gust of teaching' (Eph. 4:14, REB). I am grateful in a world of change for such rocks in the swirling waters.

⁵ The monks reverse our counting of levels: the top is the first floor!