

KYRIE ELEISON:  
*St. Catherine, the Holy Mountain and  
the Child in the Raspberry Bush*

by

PETER EDGE



CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB • 1981

© COPYRIGHT 1980 BY PETER EDGE



## KYRIE ELEISON:

### *St. Catherine, the Holy Mountain and the Child in the Raspberry Bush*

KYRIE ELEISON — Lord, have mercy.

I never knew my maternal grandfather. He was born a hundred and fifty years ago, and he died a quarter of a century before my arrival in this world. Even from my mother, I never learned much about him. Her stories of him depend primarily on her memories of a poised and handsome gentleman who pampered his youngest daughter, and these delightful memories were dimmed by his death while my mother was still a child. However, he is directly responsible for this literary exercise, not only in the obvious biological sense, but as the inspiration for the researches and travels it will describe. I must therefore tell something of him. The limited facts that underlie family tradition come from his obituary in the catalogue of the sale of his library in 1888, perhaps written by my grandmother.

In his mature years, John Wylie Barrow was a successful businessman. He had originally come to the United States from England to solicit exhibits for the London Exhibition, held in 1853 in the Crystal Palace, whose construction was so artfully described in Orville Bailey's lucid club paper several years ago. He remained in New York as an importer of linen, china and glassware. His career led him to the business of "Public Accountant and Auditor," especially for insurance companies, and he would have become a founding partner of one of the "big eight" accountants, except that the infection in his right hand, from which he died, prevented him from signing the partnership papers. This detail did not prevent the use of his name (with no share of the profits to his widow) by Barrow, Wade & Co., the principal predecessor of one of these eight.

However, my grandfather's connection with this exercise did not arise from his business career. It originated when he was a young man, and became (as stated in his obituary) "widely known for his great scholastic attainments and remarkable linguistic ability." He was an eminent student of Hebrew, and in fact was one of the founders and the first president of the Semitic Club of New York. My mother told me once that she recognized the names of most of the eminent rabbis in New York, because as rabbinical students they had come to her family home to study the Hebrew language with her father.

It was the Semitic Club that memorialized him as a man "of unusual business ability, of wide discriminating and disinterested charity, and altogether a very symmetrical and great character."

Apart from the Semitic language, my grandfather's linguistic specialty was Greek, and particularly New Testament criticism. I think it would have troubled him that his grandson should belong to an organization that printed a Greek phrase in Roman letters, and I will apologize to him in the next world (in whichever division) for the prudence that led me to opening this paper with a translation of "*Kyrie Eleison*." When barely twenty-one years old, determined (as we are told) "not to be dependent upon others," he left the University of Heidelberg and "accepted" the post of Secretary to the British Legation at Rome. With a suitable combination of scholarship, diplomacy and charm, he became acquainted with the eminent Cardinal Angelo Mai, who made available to him, for study and publication, the Codex Vaticanus, then the oldest known manuscript of the Bible. In my grandfather's library and priced at seven dollars and fifty cents, was "*Novum Testamentum Vaticanum*," edited by the great German scholar Constantine Tischendorf. Although this edition was not published until 1867, I guess it was as the result of their work on the Vatican Codex that my grandfather and Tischendorf became friends and colleagues. They probably first

met in Vienna, where my grandfather had "accepted" another diplomatic post.

Lobegott Friedrich Konstantin von Tischendorf was, by some thirteen years, the older of the two. His career in New Testament criticism originated in the study of obscure palimpsests, and in his day his decipherment of "*Codex Ephraemi Syri Rescriptus*," abandoned by earlier scholars as illegible, was hailed as a great triumph. He might, however, have fallen back into the same obscurity as his beloved twice-written vellums, had it not been for his travels to Palestine and Egypt, and particularly to the Sinai Peninsula. It was from three trips to Sinai that Tischendorf brought to Europe the earliest known complete manuscript of the Bible, now called the *Codex Sinaiticus*, a major portion of which he presented to the Emperor of Russia. A luxurious facsimile edition was published in 1862 at St. Petersburg "*Auspiciis Augustissimi Imperatoris Alexandri Secundum*," an autographed copy of which my grandfather's estate priced at five hundred dollars. Seventy years later, in 1933, the manuscript was purchased from the atheistic USSR by the British Government, aided by public subscription. It has a place of honor in the Treasure Room of the British Library, with Shackleton's diary and the manuscript of "Alice in Wonderland." The publicity attendant to this purchase brought my first inkling of this story — a newspaper clipping sent to me by mother with a note: "This was the manuscript your grandfather

translated into Russian for the Czar."

My mother was prone to exaggeration, particularly if it made a story more interesting, and I have been able to find no printed verification of her version. But the story is interesting, and believable. *And*, my wife wears, now set into a bracelet, the two intaglio amethysts that were, I was told, "the Czar's gift to your grandfather — the reward for his work on the *Codex Siniaticus*." David Horwitz, the talented and knowledgeable Chicago jeweler who designed the bracelet, has assured me that the amethysts are from the Ural Mountains, and could have come only from the Imperial mines.

We are told in the Book of Exodus how Moses led the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt into the wilderness of Sinai, where they camped before the mount, how the Lord called to Moses out of the mountain, and how the glory of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai. Among nineteenth century scholars, there was considerable dispute as to the location of this holy mountain, and much geographical and textual inquiry to determine where in the wilderness the Lord had appeared. There are several points, from Palestine to the Hejaz, for which the honor can reasonably be claimed.

Whatever the learned speculation, tradition of close to two thousand years leaves no doubt that the holy mountain of Moses is the granite peak known to the Arabs as Gebel Musa — the Mountain of Moses — and to us today as Mount Sinai. It stands

in the rugged desert of the Sinai Peninsula, midway between the Gulfs of Aqaba and Suez, only sixty miles as the eagle flies from the sea, yet more isolated by the dry and tormented wastes than is any island in the sea.

Yet despite its forbidding isolation, the Sinai Peninsula was known to civilization even before the Exodus. The Pharaohs had mined copper and turquoise there, and in some way travellers between Egypt and Asia found tracks across the peninsula. After the Israelites had reached the Promised Land, the Assyrians passed through Sinai on their way to besiege Thebes, and, several centuries after Christ, Nabatean merchants of Arabia Petraea left rock inscriptions which remain to-day. There were even then probably a few thousand tribesmen, forerunners of to-day's Bedouin, who eked out a living for their sheep in the few spots where they could find some sparse vegetation.

Around the year 285, Saint Anthony retreated to a mountain by the Nile, from which he emerged two decades later to tell of his successful contests with the devil, who appeared under the forms of wild beasts, or soldiers or even of women. In imitation, and perhaps in envy (with fantasies of Thaïs), aspiring anchorites fled the sophisticated world of Alexandria to take refuge in the solitude of the Sinai desert. As even anchorites must eat and drink, and have mutual converse with their fellows, a community (even a bishopric) was established at Pharan,



the only habitable oasis on the entire peninsula, some sixty miles north of Mount Sinai. About this time Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, the same lady who was sainted for her discovery of the true Cross, penetrated to the foot of Mt. Sinai, and there dedicated a chapel to the Virgin on the site of the burning bush, out of the midst of which the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire and said: "Draw not nigh hither. Cast off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place on which thou standest is holy ground." The bush still grows in that place, and the monks will permit no person to draw nigh thither, unless he too cast off his shoes.

It was in the year 527 that the Byzantine Emperor Justinian ordered the construction of a monastery at Mt. Sinai. It is said that the Emperor required the monastery be constructed on top of the mountain. The more practically-minded architect thought it wiser to build in the valley, where underground springs nourish the burning bush, and where there is still enough water for a monastery garden, even an orchard and a grove of date palms and olives. The Emperor rewarded his discretion — and his disobedience — with beheading. But after more than fourteen centuries the monastery still stands, and has continuously sheltered its community of monks, in evidence of the judgment of the anonymous architect and the munificence of the Emperor Justinian.

St. Catherine was decapitated in Alexandria in

the year 307. It is tradition that the body of this virgin martyr, radiant with light, was transported by angels to the highest peak of Sinai, now known as Gebel Katrin, St. Catherine's Mount, higher by a thousand feet than the nearby holy mountain of Moses. Still incorrupted, her body was discovered five centuries later by the monks, brought down to the monastery, and preserved in a sarcophagus in the apse of the basilica built by Justinian. Though the incorruptibility of the body had been preserved on Gebel Katrin, her monks did not preserve its integrity in the monastery they renamed in her honor. Today there remains on Sinai only the skull and the left hand. The rest has been distributed throughout Western Europe, as relics given or sold during medieval times to obtain financial donations for the maintenance of the monastic community.

From the time it was built, St. Catherine's was a goal for adventurous pilgrims. From the pilgrims' generosity, from the sale of relics, from contributions of devout sovereigns, the monastery became wealthy, and at its apogee it housed three or four hundred monks. It acquired a notable library, and an outstanding collection of icons, preserved over the centuries despite (and probably because of) St. Catherine's isolation in the desert.

It was to this treasury that Count Tischendorf first came in May of 1844. As he himself wrote in his *Codex Siniaticus*, in the library of the monastery, in the middle of the great hall, he perceived a large

and wide basket full of old parchments. He was told by the librarian, a "man of information," that two heaps of papers like these, mouldered by time, had already been committed to the flames. He convinced the monastic authorities to give him forty-three sheets, but the "lively satisfaction" he displayed aroused their suspicions, and Tischendorf could not get them to yield up possession of the remainder.

It was not until Tischendorf's third visit in 1859 that he saw the remaining sheets. There were then brought to him, wrapped up in a red cloth, 390 additional leaves comprising parts of the Old Testament and the complete New Testament. This time he had more self-restraint. In his words: "Full of joy, which this time I had the self-command to conceal from the steward and the rest of the community, I asked, as if in a careless way, for permission to take the manuscript into my sleeping chamber to look over it more at leisure. There by myself I could give way to the transport of joy which I felt. I knew that I held in my hand the most precious Biblical treasure in existence — a document whose age and importance exceeded that of all the manuscripts which I had ever examined during twenty years' study of the subject." It is indeed a beautiful manuscript, written in the clear and legible Greek letters used in the fourth century. Tischendorf "borrowed" the manuscript, so he said, and presented it to the Emperor of Russia, but Cyril, the

Archbishop of Sinai, denied any intention of giving it away. Today, in the monastic library, next to the facsimile edition of the *Codex*, is Tischendorf's receipt, promising the manuscript's return. And outside is the ugly campanile, reluctantly given by the Emperor Alexander in payment for this acknowledged treasure.

In recent times, until the Seven Days' War, visitors to St. Catherine's went by way of Suez, from which it was a very long day's drive. Nagel's "Guide to Egypt" tells of the "standard trip" and warns that cars should always travel in convoy, and that travellers should carry with them sufficient food and petrol. Special permits were required from the Egyptian Frontier Administration and from the Greek Orthodox authorities in Cairo. Even with a "standard trip," there cannot have been many travellers.

In the last few years, when Sinai has been encompassed by Israel, the journey has been more easily achieved, although the decrease in rigor may likewise decrease both satisfaction and understanding. El-Al operates a service to St. Catherine's airport, from which busses serve tourists on a one-day excursion from Tel Aviv. A more satisfying expedition is offered by Johnny's Desert Tours, based in Eilat, Israel's door to the Red Sea. Johnny was born in Palestine during the British Mandate. He told me that he was "a native, just like an Indian or a Zulu" — in fact, I don't think he liked the British.

But he owned a few land Rovers, and had built a small business taking vacationers from Eilat into the desert for a day. When Israel came into control of Sinai, he expanded his operation to include a weekly trip to St. Catherine's, if he had six people to fill a Land Rover. On the telephone he promised me a place if he had a \$50 deposit the next morning. He assured me he would receive the deposit in time if I mailed it in Jerusalem by six that night. I did — and he did. I wish I could claim as much efficiency for the U.S. Mail.

The Israeli port of Eilat shares the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba with the Jordanian port of Aqaba. Two miles down the coast was the border to former Egyptian Sinai. Across the water, Jordan soon becomes Saudi Arabia. In this narrow strip, surrounded by her enemies, Israel built a port and a vacation resort. The port pumps oil and handles little other cargo; it is not conspicuous. The resort is a strange combination of Miami Beach and our old West, mixed with Zionist patriotism and young student tourists. From the balcony of the Neptune Hotel, one could watch the students on the beach emerging from their sleeping-bags. On the streets, shorts were the rule and shirts omitted. Johnny's office was in a shopping center such as might be found near any small American city. The airport was literally in town — except for baggage, no need for a cab. And the temperature was well over a

hundred degrees. At night, the lights of Jordan twinkled peacefully across the water.

A few days before, I had performed a tourist's duty and bathed in the Dead Sea. The beach was dirty, the stones at the water's edge were slimy, and the extraordinary salinity made swimming impossible. From Eilat, I drove a hundred kilometers down the Gulf, along the paved military road, to a beach operated by a local kibbutz. The water was warm and clean, and colored fish nibbled at one's toes. Underfoot was fine sand. A few good-looking young tourists decorated the beach. Across the Red Sea, the mountains of the Hejaz turned purple in the evening light. It was truly lovely. Comparing this beauty with my experience a few days earlier, I could not fail to remember the pacifist phrase of some years before: "Better Red than Dead."

Early the next morning, Johnny's Land Rover called at the hotel, and Johnny himself was driving. The rest of the party consisted of three young French people, a German girl, and a Japanese student on his way home, after a year in London during which he had failed to learn English. Our trip started easily, at a hundred k/p/h down the military road. Back of my beautiful kibbutz beach, we stopped for gasoline and cokes and a lecture by Johnny on the need often to drink water from his ample supply. We left the pavement and headed into the mountains up a wadi, a dry stony watercourse, down which the water flows during one of the rare storms.

Johnny told us that there is usually one rainstorm every winter, but now it had been more than two years without rain.

There was no road in any real sense, only comparatively more level areas among the troubled rocks left by the torrents two years before. At places there were barbed wires, or signs without barbed wire — warning in Hebrew against the mines placed by the Egyptians years before. On either side, the granite mountains rose to the cloudless sky, focussing the heat into the valley. The mountains and the valley were bare, not a sign of vegetation, not one blade of grass. After three hours and fifteen miles we came to an oasis, three palm trees and a few bushes. On a bush one sunbird, the only life we saw all day. We had the luxury of a picnic lunch in the shade, before we resumed our grinding climb through the rocks.

By mid-afternoon, another fifteen or twenty miles, the mountains no longer loomed so high above us. We were close to a mile above the sea, and there was even a little grass, watered not by rain, not by springs, but by the dew condensing in the cool nights. We saw several Bedouin (there are only a few thousand in all of Sinai) and their sheep and their camels. Unbelievably, Johnny promised us a swim. He performed his promise. A few years before, a Bedouin had found an underground spring, had planted fruit trees, and dug the ditches so one tree at a time could be watered. Here we

stopped for the night, and swam, most refreshingly, in the irrigation tank.

We dined from Johnny's stores and drank his red wine. We shared the Bedouin's mint tea, and lay down to sleep under the stars, behind a fence, "so the camels should not step on us." We arose about three, and drove in the dark to the foot of Mt. Sinai, so the young people could climb it and see the sunrise from the peak. I stayed behind, so that the first light found me at the gate of St. Catherine's.

Justinian's anonymous architect had built the monastery first as a fortress. A massive rectangular wall, forty to fifty feet high, 200 to 250 feet on each side, surrounds the monastery buildings. There is one gate, built for use only by the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Archbishop of St. Catherine's, which has been walled up for two and a half centuries. Adjoining the gate is one small door, the only entrance. In fact, it used to be that ordinary pilgrims could not use this door. Instead, they were hoisted by a windlass to a dormer window high on the north wall. On the door is a sign that knocks will not be answered, that the door would open at ten. I had plenty of time to wander, while my younger and more agile fellow travellers climbed toward the sunrise.

First to circumambulate the wall. Damage and repair has continued over the centuries. The walls were last rebuilt in 1800 by General Kléber of



Napoleon's expedition to Egypt. But fundamentally they remain as originally built in the sixth century, with a few of the lower stones bearing the cross engraved into each of them by the builders. On top of the wall are some apartments for the monks, with flowers in boxes and caged birds. Outside the cages were Sinai Rosy Finches, a species limited to this dry corner of the world.

Next to climb the mountain nearby, to look over the wall into the monastery. The enclosed space is strewn with buildings of many periods. To one side, a nineteenth-century concrete monstrosity, containing the precious library and built to provide accommodations for visitors. Conspicuous is the Italianate belfry, erected in 1871 with the money paid by the Russians in atonement for the *Codex*. More interesting is the minaret. The adjoining mosque has been within the walls of the monastery at least since the year 1106, for the use of the monks' Bedouin servants. Its symbolism has probably done more to protect St. Catherine's from raids of Arab warriors than the height and strength of the fortress walls. One story states that the mosque was built in a single night to convince a palladin that the place was indeed blessed by Allah, that it should be protected as a holy place and not ravaged.

As the daylight first shone over the mountains, I heard the call of the monks to service — not by the Russian bells which are reserved for feast days, but by the *simandron*, a traditional wooden board beaten

with a mallet. The sound would waken the sleepest monk; it reverberated up to my lookout, and through the valley. The church to which the monks came, although almost hidden, is the most important building of the monastery. It was built at the time of Justinian, and shelters both the burning bush and St. Catherine's skull. But from my early morning perch, I could see little more than its modern corrugated iron roof.

With increasing light, I found my way into the monastery gardens, a grove of cypresses and olives, with a few palms. A surprising variety of birds found sanctuary there and nearby: ravens, swallows, partridge, two bulbuls, and even a Golden Oriole *en route* from Greece to winter quarters in Africa. Nearby was the monastery orchard, surrounded by a high wall of loose rocks, and containing a small chapel. I found a spot at which I could scale the wall, and stole one delicious fig. And though I remembered St. Augustine and his stolen pear, I felt no sense of sin.

It was not until past ten o'clock that Johnny was able to prevail upon the monks to admit us. Of course, we had replaced our shorts with long trousers to comply with the ecclesiastic regulations. Many from the El-Al busses were turned away. The monks were less than hospitable, perhaps, but the pressing tourists, particularly the larger groups, offended the monastic sensibilities and, in fact, were more than the small number of monks and limited space in the

monastery could handle. Our visit was distressingly brief, although my feelings were somewhat assuaged when I read recently how the British Ambassador to Israel and his family were permitted only ninety minutes — less than Johnny achieved for us.

The basilica, as the oldest building in the monastery, is buried some feet below the alleys outside, and one descends a modern staircase to enter the narthex, past a Coptic wooden door of the tenth century. From there a carved door, as old as the basilica, perhaps from Byzantium, leads into the *catholicon*, the public part of the church. Here is no carving by master masons, no soaring dome to remind the visitor of Hagia Sophia. Instead, the cramped interior was built by local workmen of local granite, crudely carved with acanthus leaves and bells and gadroons, in debased Corinthian style — an architectural effect of “A for Effort,” and a spiritual reminder that the labor for the Lord endureth. Behind the *iconostasis*, is concealed the artistic glory of the church, a Byzantine mosaic dating from the century of Justinian. Hidden here in the desert is a glory the equal of any at Ravenna or Rome or Constantinople itself, portraying the Transfiguration, with side panels of angels, and of Moses removing his sandals before the burning bush. Here one could only murmur: “*Kyrie Eleison.*”

A thousand miles from Sinai, as the Golden Oriole may have flown, is another Holy Mountain, known to us as Mount Athos, but to the Greeks

simply as "Hagia Oros," literally the Holy Mountain. The peninsula of Mount Athos lies at the North end of the Aegean Sea, the easternmost of the three fingers of the Chalkidiki Peninsula which project southwards into the sea from the plain of Thessaly. It was originally named by the Greeks after the mythological giant Athos, who hurled at Poseidon the rock that is now the actual mountain. It appears first in history when the Persians lost their fleet in adverse winds while trying to round the cape in the year 491 B.C. Its fame, however, derives from the monasteries built during the last thousand years, and from the monastic republic which has existed throughout that time and which is, even today, deemed to be independent and not truly a part of territorial Greece.

The monastic life of Mount Athos started, as on Mount Sinai, with a few hermits retreating from the sophisticated world — in this case the luxury and intrigue of Byzantium. Also, as on Mount Sinai, the anchorites needed converse with their colleagues. In the year 963, they were brought together into a community by Anathasius the Anchorite, counsellor of the Emperor Nicephoras Phocas, and founder of the Grand Lavra, the oldest and largest of the monasteries. Other monasteries soon followed. Each of the Orthodox nations, the Greeks, the Bulgarians, the Russians, the Serbs, had its own, with its own customs and its own national patronage. By the 16th century there were forty monasteries, all still

there today. But in the sixteenth century there were forty thousand monks; today, two or three thousand at the most.

For the first six hundred years, the monks lived under the strict *coenobitic* order, as followed in the monastery of St. John of Studion at Constantinople, with complete community of existence, government by a single abbot, and a stern prohibition on the eating of meat. Some of the monasteries owned rich domains in Asia Minor, in Russia or in the Balkans. In more recent centuries, some of these wealthy monasteries introduced the *idiorhythmic* order, considered more liberal and comfortable, with meat and personal possessions and a quasi-democratic government by two abbots, assisted by a council of monks. The dichotomy persists to this day.

In the year 1060, the Emperor Constantine Monomachos issued a bull, laying down a strict prohibition applicable to all of the monasteries: Access to the Holy Mountain was forbidden to "any woman, female animal, child, eunuch, or person with a beardless face." To this day, no woman has been permitted ashore, there are no cows, no chickens, no nanny goats. The beast of burden is the sexless mule. The monks are bearded, and I identified no eunuchs. But, fortunately for me, a beardless visitor is now permitted. It is possible for a man, with sufficient incentive and effort, to participate briefly in this remnant of the old Byzantine way of life.

I cannot give to my grandfather any responsi-

bility — credit or blame — for my decision to visit Mount Athos. He must have known of the ancient manuscripts in the monastic libraries, but the catalogue of his own books reveals no work on the subject, unless perhaps the Honorable Robert Curzon, Junior, visited the Holy Mountain on his way to visit the “Monasteries of the Levant.” No — I think the incentive in this case was mine alone. It may have arisen from the remoteness and inaccessibility, both in space and in time, of the Holy Mountain, referred to by the anonymous author of Nagel’s Guide to Greece as “one of the most remarkable sites in the whole of Greece, if not in the entire Orient,” where the “strange and dateless way of life led by the remaining monks” looks to the traveller “like some remote lost world.” A challenge was added by the travel agents’ blunt assertions that visitors are no longer permitted. And undoubtedly there was a certain charm in the prohibition of the bull issued nine hundred years ago by the Emperor Constantine Monomachos.

Even in this era of satellite electronic communications, a transatlantic telephone call can still work a few miracles. The charming Australian assistant of a Thessaloniki travel agent would promise nothing, but assured me her boss had some connections with the Ministry of Northern Greece, and that just possibly the necessary permits could be obtained. My daughter gave me strong spiritual support with the gift of a knapsack just the right size, and the

fortuitous warning to be sure to carry one complete change of clothing. And most necessary, my wife kindly blessed the endeavor.

The published guides describe the formalities which must be undergone in order to achieve a visit to Mount Athos. The first is an authorization by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, application for which must be made through the traveller's embassy. The United States Embassy in Athens disclaimed any responsibility by a referral to the Consulate at Thessaloniki (in English, Salonica), with the discouraging comment that permits were being permitted only to the clergy and to archeologists. The consul was more helpful with good wishes and a letter to the Ministry of Northern Greece. The accommodating Australian travel agent furnished an interpreter and influence. After a full day in bureaucratic waiting rooms, most reminiscent of Minotti's "The Consul," I had in hand a letter, addressed to the Holy Community, which stated (I hoped and assumed) that the Government of Greece had no objection to my visiting the Holy Mountain. I was obviously not of the Orthodox clergy, and had furnished no evidence of my non-existent archeological scholarship. Faith and perserverance had prevailed.

I had read that on Mount Athos it was necessary to travel on foot, on mule-back or by motor-boat. One warning indicated the need to be equipped with provisions in case one's visit should coincide with a

period of fasting. The practical requirements limited my burden to my daughter's well chosen small knapsack, into which I put the complete change of clothing she wisely specified, a razor, a knife, my bird-guide and a loaf of bread. I was fortunate to get a ride to Ouranoupolis at the base of the Athos peninsula. Six the next morning found me on the town dock and boarding the motor-boat carrying passengers and freight to Daphne, the principal port for Mount Athos.

The monks' procedural difficulties were effective to hold down the number of visitors. We were only about fifteen passengers. About eight were Orthodox priests, monks returning from rest and recreation ashore, and visiting clergy. There was one other American, a man about forty, married to a Greek wife, intending to spend only the day and to return to his wife and a comfortable bed that evening. The rest were five or six students, from Germany and the Netherlands, travelling alone or in pairs. I did not identify one archeological scholar in the lot. The fare was trivial, just a few drachma for the three-hour trip. The atmosphere was most informal — no questions about passports or permits.

The boat-ride alone would, as the Guide Michelin might put it, "*mérite bien un détour.*" Above the calm Aegean sea, not wine-dark but pale in the light of early morning, rose the spine of the isthmus and peninsula of Mount Athos, crowned with forests of pine, oak and chestnut. Once Ouranapolous



was astern, there was no sign of civilization, until we reached Diocharious, our first monastery, situated on the shore with arcades letting out to the sea. Founded in the tenth century, probably built in substantially its present form six hundred years later, its first appearance is of a fortress, with high walls, one door, and a crenelated tower. Coming closer, we could see atop the red stone walls wooden structures, the living quarters for the monks, mostly empty now, but not in any evident disrepair. It is overwhelmingly a building with a serious purpose, most certainly not a seaside resort. One monk went ashore, with some provisions and hardware, and a battery for the engine of the monastery caique, so there might be fish for the refectory.

Three more such riparian monasteries, and then, in mid-morning, we arrived at Daphne, the port for Mount Athos, but little more than a dock, a tiny general store, several fishermen's shacks, and a customs office. Yes, a customs office, where the Holy Community inspected our slight baggage and took our passports and permits. We were told — perhaps, in view of the tourists' unanimous ignorance of Greek, I should say it was indicated to us — that they would be returned to us at Karyes, the capital of the Holy Community, seven miles away, several thousand feet up, atop the backbone of the peninsula. Here, for the first time, the guide books failed me. "Mules will be found at Daphne and all the monasteries," says Nagel; in fact, I saw but one mule in all

of Athos, under a large monk who had no intention of renting it to me. Instead we were shepherded into a bus — “pre-war” would be misleading; it was probably already second-hand in 1930.

I think we saw its last day. A few hundred yards up the mountain it lurched to a sudden stop — a broken axle. The only other vehicle at Mount Athos, a small flat-bed truck, passed us on its way up the mountain to Karyes, with our passports and permits. It was not a matter of choice. We were back in the sixteenth century, but without the mules, and seven miles is not all that far. One by one we got to Karyes. But of course the ecclesiastical bureaucracy had closed for lunch. We learned somehow that we would not get our passports and special permits until the offices reopened at three. Fortunately, Karyes had what the Guide describes as a restaurant — a stove, two tables, five chairs. But the stove had a stew, and after a seven-mile walk uphill, any stew was good.

In due course, lunches were finished, abbots and *epistatai* and police officers came back to life, and special permits were issued. For a small price, the equivalent of three or four dollars, I received the classic *diamonitirion*, entitling me to stay on the Holy Mountain. It is a handsome document, printed with appropriate religious decoration, manually signed by all four members of the governing council. It appeared to state that I could remain for four days. Its expiration was ten days before the date I

received it, which troubled me until I realized the date was Old Style, that the Gregorian calendar had not yet been accepted on the Holy Mountain. There was no doubt that for a brief time I was officially entitled to the hospitality of every monastery in the community, the free hospitality offered to every pilgrim. A contribution is traditionally given at each monastery, but it was never demanded, and I never saw that the students gave anything, or that they received any less.

The natural destination for the first night was Iviron, on the east coast, another seven miles, down hill and easy. The north European students and I straggled in, well before sunset. Here our guide book spoke the truth: "It must not be forgotten that monastery gates shut at sunset, announced by the beating of the *simandron*" (the same piece of heavy wood that had announced the sunrise at St. Catherine's in Sinai). The heavy doors are shut and bolted with a finality that would discourage any tardy pilgrim. There was no indication that charity would overcome tradition, that there would be any chance the late one might avoid a night outside the gates.

It would be hyperbole to say that the monks of Iviron welcomed the pilgrim. But we were each taken in, and shown to a room high over the wall, cantilevered a hundred feet up over the scrub forest. There were perhaps ten iron beds, without springs, with a board, a thin mattress, a cotton blanket. No

table, no chairs, no decorations. Down the corridor a washroom, with a bowl and cold water in a pitcher, an adjoining Turkish toilet. An unscreened door led to a balcony, with a fine view over the seacoast.

Awaiting the supper hour, we were reasonably free to wander within the walls. As had appeared from outside at Diocharious, here at Iviron, and indeed at all the monasteries, the living quarters are attached to or built atop the exterior walls. Separate buildings within the courtyard house the refectory, the library and working buildings. In the center of the court is the church, usually painted red and surmounted by a cupola. There may be several chapels, and at least one monastery has a campanile in the same inappropriate style as the Czar's Italian bell tower at St. Catherine's. The monks do not make any effort to show their treasures to the lay pilgrim, and the icons and jewels are mostly hidden unseen in the darkened churches and sacristies.

At Iviron, two of us were fortunate when a young monk beckoned to us and invited us into the refectory — a large room, stone benches and tables, basins worn into the marble table tops with centuries of meatless suppers. At one end, there was a pulpit for the reader. The entire walls were covered with frescoes in the Cretan style, depicting the saints, decorative but formal in their iconography. Our volunteer was dressed, like all the monks, in a long black robe, drawn together around the waist

with a leather belt. He, like his fellows, had long hair, in his case neatly gathered into a bun. Of course, he wore a beard. From the refectory, he led us to the library. Its particular treasure was a robe, first worn by an Emperor of Byzantium in the year 1000, given by him in honor of the founding of Iviron, or perhaps a visit he had paid. In that place, time was telescoped. Somehow, the Emperor was still present in his robe.

It was of course not possible to converse with this kindly monk, except to express gratitude in the universally welcome language of a small banknote. I met no monk who spoke a word of any language other than Greek. We pilgrim tourists circulated rumors, that the librarian at the Grand Lavra understood a little German, or that the monk in charge of the pilgrims at some other monastery somewhere up the coast claimed to speak some French. Like most rumors, these were never verified. My own Greek was very limited — to two words. "*Kyrie Eleison*" is a fine way to begin the mass. Perhaps it is a suitable greeting in a monastery — although it appeared presumptuous to try it. It was surely inadequate to discover the hour of supper, the distance to the next monastery, or the availability of a motor-boat.

At dark, we were brought to supper. We did not eat in a frescoed refectory, but in the corridor below our dormitory. Seven of us sat on benches around an oak table, with two candles. There was

one loaf of bread for all, and a monk shuffled in with bowls of soup, cold, thin and watery, with a few vegetables floating around. It was not very good. I thought of pushing it aside and eating more of whatever came next, but fortunately better judgment prevailed. There was no next. The monk blew out the candles, and without lights, there was no alternative to bed. The hospitality of Iviron had been exhausted, and so was I.

I had intended to travel south from Iviron to the Grand Lavra, the oldest, largest and reputedly the most beautiful of the monasteries, located near the cape where the Persian fleet had foundered twenty-five centuries ago. I was deterred by the obvious absence of mules, and the unreliability of any information concerning the possibility of finding a motor-boat which would take me around that cape and back to Daphne. Instead, I decided to walk north along the east coast to Vatopediou, whence I could reach Daphne on foot if no other transportation could be found. Vatopediou is an old and large monastery, supposed to have been built by the Emperor Arcadius in memory of his child who was shipwrecked nearby. Some monks found the child under a raspberry bush growing near the coast. I had trouble remembering the name until I recalled the Greek root of "pediatrics" and "pedagogy." "*Vato*" must mean "raspberry bush." Lo! The child in the raspberry bush! I had learned two more Greek words, not very useful in ordinary conversa-

tion, but most helpful in finding my new destination.

Shortly after sunrise, I was back on the road in the company of two students from West Berlin, whose English was somewhat better than my German. I had insisted that they not permit my slower pace to delay them, and ostensibly they agreed. Somehow I always caught up with them, whether as a result of my perserverance or their kindness I could not be sure. Breakfast at Iviron had been less than nourishing — only one very small cup of very black coffee. But a few handfuls of raspberries (the bushes do grow on the Holy Mountain), a couple of figs plucked from a tree by the road, and part of the bread I had purchased in Salonica, were enough so that we could appreciate the beautiful morning.

Within an hour, we left forever the gravel road that had served the deceased bus and the one flat-bed truck, to head for the small monastery of Stavronikita, founded in 1542 by the Patriarch Jeremiah of Constantinople. A gate across the broad path bore a multi-lingual sign, even in English, which warned that Stavronikita had no facilities for overnight pilgrims, that it would be unwise to arrive without time to reach a better equipped place before sunset. But in mid-morning, the welcome was cordial. The bell at the gate brought a monk with a smile. He escorted us through the courtyard, decorated with Anatolian dishes set into the walls, to a small reception room, with plush chairs and an embroidered cloth on the table. He left us alone a few moments,

and then returned with three small glasses, filled with a liquor that in Serbia would be slivovitz, and a dish on which were six pieces of Turkish delight — that Oriental confection of fruit-flavored gelatin, covered with powdered sugar. My faith in the hospitality of Mount Athos began to return.

Heart-warmed and strengthened, we continued north to Pantocrator, perched on a cliff above the sea, dominating the coast from several miles away. At times our path became a road, several yards wide, built of large stone blocks, much resembling the Via Appia as it can be seen in the countryside south of Rome. This was indeed the road built centuries ago in the days when forty thousand monks lived on the Holy Mountain, when emperors and princes and merchants contributed to the wealth of the community, when a good paved road to carry all the mule and foot traffic could be constructed and paid for. It led to another fine welcome.

At Pantocrator, the vegetable soup was hot, with cheese in it. It was served with a proper Greek salad with olives and garlic, and followed with fresh fruit. It was accompanied by a stimulating glass of wine. While sipping my after-dinner slivovitz, I perused the register of guests, and somehow was pleased to observe that in the summer of 1977 I was the oldest lay pilgrim, and one of only two from the United States, to visit at Pantocrator. It was here I parted from my protective young German friends, who had identified a caique at the dock as a motor-



boat headed for the Grand Lavra. Against their strong advice, I resolved to proceed alone to Vatopediou. On the map it appeared to be only two hours' walk and, even at a slow pace, I surely could achieve the distance in the five hours left before sunset.

Pantacrator had extensive orchards, in which the old road had become lost. I stumbled among the fruit trees searching for my way, and was in fact returning when I found the old paving stones leading up the mountain, north to Vatopediou. The coastline was too steep to carry even a narrow road, so the only route was up a thousand feet and over the rocky spur that stuck out into the sea. The afternoon was hot, and the wine and slivovitz had their effect. It seemed most suitable to convert my knapsack into a pillow, and to rest by the roadside, in fact in the middle of the road. I was undisturbed, but I don't think I slept long. When I awoke the sun was still high and hot. The road became steeper, and the paving was not always smooth. I continued only by the application of a new stringent rule: when I just had to stop and rest, I must first take another hundred steps. It worked. In due but extended time, the road became level in a cool grove of yellowing chestnut trees, reaching north in what appeared an easy progress to my destination. To the left, leading away from the sea, a narrow trail diverged in the yellow wood, indicated only by a small arrow bearing the one word "Vatopediou." I have

not yet been able to explain to myself why it was not taken; Robert Frost himself might not have known. But the grassy road obviously had the better claim, and that made all the difference.

The wide road through the forest was delightful. It was broad and smooth, leading gently downward. It passed a small fountain built by some long-forgotten pilgrim, and eventually led to a farm, with a small stone house, some sheds and a barn where there should have been some mules. Here were two monks working the farm. One was an older man with a flowing white beard — instinctively I recognized him as St. Christopher, the protective and patron saint of travellers. The other was young, old enough to be a man but yet too young for a beard. I gratefully accepted a drink of water, for there are times and places where pollution and infection lose their importance. To my question: "Vatopediou?", there was no doubt. Christopher and his young colleague pointed straight ahead.

The road, still sometimes paved with great stones, continued down. I saw no fork and was not aware of any abrupt change. But gradually, there was something different. The road became a path, less even under foot. The path became a trail headed steeply down the mountain, and I was fortunate to find a stout staff with which to maintain my balance. Suddenly, I was only a few hundred feet above the sea, looking at a quiet bay, quite devoid of a monastery. Vatopediou was not hidden, or perhaps

around the corner — it was just plain not there. I could see only a long stony beach, with two small houses at the water's edge — one at the foot of the trail, the other a thousand yards down the beach. I had neither the physical nor the emotional stamina to turn back. Perforce, I descended to the beach, murmuring (as befitted a lay pilgrim) my personal equivalent of "*Kyrie Eleison*."

The first house stood over the water. It was obviously occupied, but no one was there. In front of the other, looking out at the sea, two monks sat in the lee of a large rowboat. Over the stones, it took me ten minutes to reach them. "Vatopediou?" I asked. In reply, one monk pointed up the mountain. I pointed to the boat, made motions of rowing, and again asked: "Vatopediou?" The other monk pointed up the mountain, and spoke. I did not recognize the words, but his meaning was clear: "Go back the way you came." I trudged back down the beach, and arrived at the foot of the trail just as Christopher and his acolyte were descending.

They were more courteous, but the reply to my "Vatopediou?" was identical — to point back up the trail. I knew I could not possibly climb the mountain again that afternoon. On the back of my map I drew a picture of a boat, but the response was the same gesture of pointing back up the mountain. I was then inspired to open my wallet. A new expression came into St. Christopher's eyes. It was not mercenary or greedy, rather it was an expression

of appreciation of what the Lord had sent, as if a particularly fine dorade had appeared among the small red mullet in his net. "*Barca*," he exclaimed, and I then knew forever the Greek word for "boat." The principle was settled and we never did discuss the price.

Under his house was the boat, drawn clear of the water on rough wooden rollers. It was no easy task to manhandle the heavy boat to the water, placing each roller with care, but after maybe half an hour it was afloat. It was a large straked open boat, with the high Mediterranean prow found from Gibraltar to the Bosphorus. There was indeed an engine, disinclined to start. Each in our own way, we prayed "*Kyrie Eleison*;" there was a "pop" in one cylinder, then in another, and then the positive "chug-chug" that promised we would indeed round the cape. I gladly dropped my staff into the water and climbed into the bow. There was no reverse gear, and the young man waded in to turn the boat around, then gave one last push and we were off. The monks down the beach looked unhappy, as if they felt I really should have been scrambling up the mountainside. As I sat, watching the cliffs glide past, for surprisingly many miles, I resolved that St. Christopher's fare should be large enough that he would be not even tempted to complain. Five hundred drachmas was right. He was indeed grateful, but much less so than I.

Under any circumstances the sea approach to

Vatopediou would be impressive. The pink stone walls were aglow in the afternoon light, softened by the wooden living quarters on top, with the library tower dominating one corner, and the still open gates expressing a stern welcome. Compared to the stony beach I had left behind, with only the one steep trail up the mountainside, the effect was overwhelming. Moored at the dock was a civilian motor caïque. The captain made me understand he was leaving for the Grand Lavra at dawn, that he would be back by mid-morning to continue on to the fishing village of Ierissos in civilian Greece, from which I knew there was a bus to Thessaloniki. I had expended my strength that day, and felt certain that I would be waiting on the dock.

The sun had already dropped below the mountain as I crossed the beach to the gates of Vatopediou. The porter was standing ready to pull the doors shut. I watched them close behind me, and heard the bolts snap into place as I walked into the courtyard. I was prepared to be grateful for a repeat of Iviron's dormitory and cold soup. The monks of Vatopediou did much better. Here the pilgrim had a private room, with springs on the bed, even a bedside table. The washroom had running water, cold of course, and the great luxury of a European toilet with a seat. Supper was not lavish, but the soup was hot, there was goat's cheese with the bread, and fruit and wine. The only other pilgrims were two young men from Prague whose German was worse than mine. And

next morning I watched a monk bake the bread which accompanied the morning coffee. After breakfast he ironed the linen, with a hand iron filled with coals from the kitchen range. The atmosphere was almost homey.

Vatopediou is built on the hillside, sloping down to the beach. The slope in the courtyard is sufficiently steep that the ground is stepped, so that the general effect is of an operatic scene. One would almost expect the angels to come and carry Marguerite to Heaven, except of course that Marguerite would not have been permitted there in the first place. But the effect was spoiled — not really spoiled perhaps, but surely changed — by the cats. Vatopediou was full of cats. They were on every step in the courtyard. For the cats, the monks must have forgotten the bull of the Emperor Constantine Monomachos, as they cannot all have been toms, miraculously cloned by some ecclesiastic parthogenesis. And then I thought of the birds. At St. Catherine's in the midst of the Sinai desert, I had seen fifteen species in a few hours. In two days on Mount Athos, I had seen exactly two birds; one hoo-poe, gaudy buff with a black and white crest, on the road from Karyes to Iviron, and one dull olive wood warbler by the fountain in the yellow chestnut woods above St. Christopher's farm. Except for the gulls over the sea, only these two. Perhaps even the wild birds respected the tradition of a thousand years and the authority of the imperial bull.

It would have been unfitting to leave the Holy Mountain without attending services in the church. Mass usually begins at three o'clock in the morning and lasts until sunrise. I arose at half past four and found the church in the pitch-black courtyard. The only light in the narthex came from two candles in the *catholicon*. The door of the *iconostasis* was firmly closed, and I suppose the mass itself was finished. But in the dim light of those two candles, a service was continuing. About twenty monks, the entire community, sat in two rows, facing the reader, a young monk who droned on and on. He did not read very well, and stumbled over the long words. His voice was a monotone, except when he raised it to emphasize an occasional specially holy word: "*Kyrie*" or "*Christos*" perhaps. As my eyes became accustomed to the dim light, I could see the form of the church — a squat Greek cross, with low vaulting, a cupola over the crossing. On the walls there were the frescoes designated by Nagel's Guide as particularly fine, and on the *iconostasis* the reputedly beautiful icons. Of course there was no opportunity to inspect them.

The young reader went on and on. His boyish voice and semiliterate reading cast a hypnotic spell. It was not difficult to picture the generations of monks, who for hundreds of years had sat quietly listening to a reading of the scriptures, sometimes expressively, sometimes inadequately, but always respectfully. The first light of dawn began to appear

in the small windows. A senior monk arose to put out the candles. As the first one flickered out the reader slowed down and spoke more clearly. I could distinguish the syllables, if not the words. And then as the second and last candle was extinguished, I could clearly hear and fully understand the final words of the service:

*"Kyrie Eleison, Christos Eleison, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera."*\*

---

\*Perhaps my ears deceived me. Several classic-minded members of the Literary Club have reminded me that this Greek monk could not have spoken in Latin, and must have used some phrase such as "*Kai ta loipá.*"



THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN FOR THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB AND READ BEFORE THE CLUB ON MONDAY EVENING THE TWENTY-NINTH OF OCTOBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED SEVENTY-NINE. THIS EDITION OF THREE HUNDRED COPIES WAS PRINTED FOR THE CLUB IN THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED EIGHTY-ONE.